The Sociology of Art
Ways of Seeing

Edited by David Inglis and John Hughson
Ars non gratia artis?
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Thinking ‘Art’
Sociologically

David Inglis

Introduction

The sociology of art encompasses many different themes and issues, from micro-level analyses, such as studies of how the people called ‘artists’ actually carry out their work, to macro-level considerations, such as thinking about the place of ‘art’ in the general structure of modern societies. Sociologists, and others who draw upon sociological ideas, have turned their attention to a great many issues connected with artistic matters.

In this chapter we will set out the main themes that have guided, and have arisen as a result of, these investigations. Like any other branch of sociology, the sociology of art is made up of different theoretical perspectives and empirical foci. Despite this, there is much broad agreement on many key issues amongst scholars of many different persuasions. This chapter does not pretend to provide totally comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the ‘sociology of art’. Nonetheless, in what follows we will emphasise points of convergence between different scholars and different perspectives to illustrate the set of generally shared ideas that together make up the sociological analysis of art.

We will first look at how sociologists have gone beyond commonsense views of what ‘art’ is and what it means. We will then examine how sociologists have also carried out similar operations for the notion of ‘artist’. After that we shall consider how ‘art’ and ‘society’ might be related to each other. Finally we will show how one might sociologically analyse how ‘art worlds’ operate and how they are related to wider social forces.

Taking issue with ‘art’

One of the key ideas that sociology has contributed to the understanding of artistic matters is the notion that we should not take the word ‘art’ at face value and accept it uncritically. In the contemporary Western world the word
'art' is commonly taken to refer to a set of things that contains certain types of painting, sculptures, books, theatrical and musical performances and suchlike. In everyday commonsense understandings, certain objects are regarded as being clearly and identifiably 'artistic' in nature. The idea that a sonnet by Shakespeare, a painting by Van Gogh or a play by Goethe is indeed an artwork, almost goes without saying, so obviously 'artistic' in nature are such things. There is apparently an 'essence' of art, such that some things are clearly 'artistic' and others not.

Most forms of the sociology of art, however, break with such commonsense understandings of what is 'art' (Duvignaud, 1972: 23). Instead, sociologists argue that no object has intrinsically 'artistic' qualities. Instead, sociologists tend to see the 'artistic' nature of an 'artwork' not as an intrinsic and inalienable property of the object, but rather as a label put onto it by certain interested parties, members of social groups whose interests are augmented by the object being defined as 'art' (Becker, 1984). This labelling process might be quite unintentional and unconscious. Nonetheless, it is a central idea of most forms of sociology of art that the label 'art' is never neutral. Some social group always stands to gain in some way or another by a particular object being labelled as 'art', or conversely, another object being denied that label (Wolff, 1981: 40). In other words, the sociological view tends to see 'art' as always thoroughly bound up with politics, the latter term is meant in its widest sense, where it refers to conflicts and struggles between different social groups.

From this perspective, the things called 'artworks' are always part of the social world, even if some interested parties claim that they exist somehow 'above' and 'beyond' society in an elevated realm of their own. This is the root of sociology's opposition to the academic discipline of aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1992 [1979]). This branch of philosophy, sociology alleges, has classically seen artworks as existing only in and of themselves. But the ways in which aestheticians try to understand the 'pure' nature of 'art' is only made possible by ignoring to all intents and purposes the ways in which these 'artworks' are always embedded in social and political contexts. Without analysis of such contexts, sociologists claim, the analysis of art will remain far too idealised and abstract. One must always realise that something only counts as 'art' because a particular powerful person or group has defined it to be so.

If 'art' is a label put on certain things by certain people, where did this label come from? Sociologists stress that the term 'art' — and its sister terms 'artwork' and 'artist' — are historical inventions, that first appeared in the West several hundred years ago. Before that time, the term 'art' in the modern sense did not exist. Instead, people in the medieval world produced certain cultural items for use in particular ways. For example, religious icons were made in order to decorate churches and to give a sense of the presence of God (Williams, 1981: 96). It is only at a much later date, primarily from the late eighteenth century onwards, that such icons are redefined as 'art' by groups of people who have an interest in classifying them in that way — such groups as art historians. From a sociological perspective, when such groups label medieval religious artefacts as 'art'; they unwittingly are reinterpreting the past in the light of their own interests. It is in the interests of such groups, who act as the professional custodians of 'art', to appropriate the past and claim professional expertise and control over it. But in so doing, they take the specifically modern notion of 'art' and anachronistically apply it to ages when such an idea did not exist.

The same issue applies when we realise that the idea of 'art' is not just a modern invention but a Western invention too. Societies outside the West do not possess the modern Western categories 'art', 'artist' and 'artistic', and thus, strictly speaking, do not have 'art' at all (Shiner, 2001). Only modern Western societies have 'art', because only this type of society operates with the very category 'art' itself. When today cultural objects from a non-Western society, such as drawings by Australian Aborigines or the headaddresses of Native Americans, are displayed in Western museums as 'art', these objects have undergone a systematic reinterpretation as to their value and function from the way they were understood in their original social context. Whilst originally such objects would have been seen by the people that made and used them to have religious or ceremonial significance, once the Western label 'art' has been put on them in the context of a museum, they lose their initial cultural meanings and are redefined in Eurocentric ways. This shows that what appears in museums of 'art', and the ways in which they are displayed and represented are never, and can never, be neutral (Meyer, 1979; Price, 1989; Dubin, 1999).

It has often been remarked that the term 'art' does not exist on its own but exists along with terms that are its opposites. Since the time of the Romantics the categories 'popular culture' and 'mass culture' have fulfilled the role of being 'art's' opposites (Gans, 1974). Whilst 'art' connotes things that are thoughtfully made and which resist easy understanding, these other categories connote quite the opposite, indicating things that are shallow, easily comprehended and made without thought through means of factory-like mass production. One can find literally hundreds of authors who over the last century and a half have argued that 'art' is superior to 'popular culture', their writings being reflective of wider public attitudes as to the exalted position of 'art' over other cultural forms. We will cite one particularly famous example of this sort of writing. In an article of 1939, the American art critic Clement Greenberg (1986 [1939]) divided the world of cultural objects up into two categories, both of which were seen to be 'objective' and indisputable classifications. On the one side was 'avant-garde art' which was made by individuals possessed of vision and thoughtfulness; such art could be comprehended only by those who made the necessary intellectual efforts to do so. On the other side there was 'kitsch', a term which for Greenberg describes the world of mass culture — of comic strips, Hollywood movies and lurid newspapers and novels. For Greenberg 'kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times' (Greenberg, 1986 [1939]: 12). For Greenberg and for many other intellectuals of his period and later, there was no question that 'art' (in this case, of an avant-garde form like abstract expressionism in painting) was just 'naturally' superior to all other forms of culture.
Sociologists are deeply sceptical of claims about the 'naturalness' of anything, especially categories used to rank cultural forms on a scale from 'high' to 'low'. For sociologists, all categories and ways of classifying things are social fabrications, reflective or expressive of the social conditions of a particular society or a specific social group within it (Durkheim and Mauss, 1969 [1903]). No classification or selection of what is 'art' or 'popular culture', 'good' or 'bad', 'refined' or 'crude' and so on, is 'neutral' or 'objective'. Someone might claim that a particular piece was 'good art', but someone else might have a quite different opinion if he or she was a member of another social group and was using other ways of classifying things. For sociologists, what counts at any one time as 'art' in general, let alone as 'good art', is historically contingent, and rooted in the life conditions of the group to which the people making the classifications belong. As the sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim (1985 [1936]: 22) put it, 'every concept...every concrete meaning...[contains] a crystallization of the experiences of a certain group'. Thus definitions of what is 'art' and what is not are thoroughly bound up in processes of struggle and conflict between different social groups, with each group more or less unintentionally trying to define cultural reality in such a way as to suit its best interests. When a person defines a particular object as 'great art', to the sociological eye this tells 'us' less about the 'artwork' itself and more about the tastes and preferences of the social group that person hails from. From this perspective, when authors like Greenberg assert the superiority of certain types of culture over others, they are failing to realise that their judgments are not 'objective' but are in fact expressive of the tastes of a particular social group, in this case a highly educated intellectual elite (Gans, 1978 [1966]). In this way, these authors are guilty not only of a certain type of cultural snobbery, but also of naïveté and a lack of self-reflection.

It is not just that the ideas as to 'art' particular people have are expressive of the preferences of the group to which they belong. According to many sociologists, especially those influenced by Marxist ideas, the dominant ideas about 'art' in a particular society will be expressive of the preferences of the dominant social groups in that society. Mannheim (1956: 184) argues that in societies where 'the political and social order basically rests upon the distinction between "higher" and "lower" human types, an analogous distinction is also made between "higher" and "lower" objects of knowledge or aesthetic enjoyment'. In other words, where there is a class division between rulers and ruled, 'upper classes' and 'lower classes', culture will be divided upon those lines. There will be a culture of the ruling classes that is defined as 'high', and a culture of the lower classes that will be defined as 'low'. The value of a particular object (like a work of 'art') involves how it is perceived by members of a given society, and in turn this perception is determined by the characteristics of who produces or possesses the object. Thus cultural objects produced or used by lower class persons will be perceived by society at large as having relatively little value. But those cultural objects produced or used by higher class persons will have relatively high value attached to them. Quite simply, then, views dominant in a particular society as to what things are 'artistic' and what things are not will be closely connected to the tastes and preferences of dominant social groups. These dominant groups could be classes or they could take some other form, such as ethnic groups. Some Afro-American intellectuals allege that the 'canon' of 'great works' of literature (Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, etc.) taught until recently without question in American schools and universities is a Eurocentric fabrication, rather than a neutral reflection of what constitutes important literature (Corne and Griffin, 1997).

White people (or rather, white intellectual elites) have defined their own culture as 'superior' when in fact other cultural forms, such as writing by black authors, could be quite as worthy of interest and study. Because classifications of what counts as 'art' are never immutably fixed, certain cultural forms such as cinema, jazz and photography, can be at one point in time regarded as 'popular culture', and at other times (certain elements of them) can be defined as 'art' or something approaching it (Peterson, 1972; Christopherson, 1974; Lopes, 2002). Once again, a sociological perspective stresses that 'art' is always part of wider social life, and cannot be treated as if it were a realm wholly cut off from all sorts of social influences, both manifest and latent.

Not only the reputation of a particular 'artwork' or a specific cultural genre but also the standing of a particular artist, shifts over time. The 'share price' of an artist can be very low at one point in time and very high at another, these shifts resulting from struggles between different social groups, each seeking to label their own preferred forms of 'art' as being superior to the forms preferred by others (Lang and Lang, 1988). A historically informed sociological approach tends to suggest that the 'canon' of 'great works of art' is a social fabrication, dependent on what particular people – especially powerful people – at a particular time think is 'great art', rather than merely being a reflection of works that are intrinsically 'great'. One way in which a particular 'artist' can be given 'everlasting fame' – at least for a time – is for him or her to be defined as a 'classic' by those who construct school and university curricula. In this way, the artist is defined as someone whose works are worth attending to, even hundreds of years after their death. But from a sociological perspective, given other circumstances, they might never have been defined in that way at all, and another otherwise neglected or forgotten figure would have taken their place. Shakespeare might in the present day have been totally forgotten if his works had not had people over the last few centuries evangelising on his behalf, attesting to his 'greatness' and defining his plays as 'crucial' cultural forms that must appear on the curricula taken by schoolchildren and university students.

Taking issue with the 'artist'

Just as 'art' is a modern, Western label put by certain individuals or social groups onto certain objects, so too is the term 'artist' a label that can be conferred – or not – on certain people. To be labelled as an artist brings, in our society, certain advantages with it, such as a certain type of power, status and, possibly, wealth. Thus there is a lot to be gained, and a lot to be lost, depending on whether a person gets defined as an 'artist' and whether a large number of people accept the label.
Sociologists argue that it is not appropriate to generalise the idea of the 'artist'—a single person engaged in creative activity towards making a particular 'artistic' artefact—to all societies. This is because this idea of an isolated individual artist is a fairly recent Western notion that first appears in the early modern period (Williams, 1981: 112). Before this period in the West, and in other societies at all times, there has been no corresponding category. This is because such creative work has often been done in groups rather than by individuals, so the individualism of the modern Western notion of 'artist' means the term could not be applied directly to other societies or the pre-modern West. The idea of the artist as 'genius' is an invention of the Renaissance and early modern periods (Wolff, 1981: 27; DeNora, 1995). The hot-headed, temperamental artist begins to become a cultural type in the late eighteenth century; for example, one of the earliest dramatisations of such a figure is contained in Goethe's (1851 [1790]) play Torquato Tasso, dating from 1790.

The early modern period also witnessed the splitting of the ideas of 'artisan', which came to mean a skilled manual worker, and 'artist', which takes on the meaning of a highly gifted, idiosyncratic person possessed of a singular 'artistic' vision (Gimpel, 1969: 5). The stereotype image of the 'artist' as a lonely and isolated figure, set against the constrications of polite society, is an invention of the nineteenth century (Wolff, 1981: 11). Why did such a view of the artist come to prominence at this time? First, such a view was in part a function of the self-understanding of artists of the period, who developed a way of representing themselves in a more glamorous—and indeed rather self-serving—way than hitherto was possible. Second, it was also a representation of the 'artist's' new and more precarious position in the division of labour. As the institution of patronage, where the artist was directly commissioned by a buyer to produce a particular piece, went into decline, artists were compelled to produce works for an art market in which their works might or might not be bought (Zolberg, 1983). The view of the lonely artist is thus connected to the relatively insecure conditions of employment faced by many artists from the early nineteenth century onwards. Third, the idea of the 'artist' as a unique individual 'genius' was also developed by the broad group of early nineteenth-century thinkers called the Romantics, who sought to protest against what they saw as the increasingly dreary and prosaic nature of life in a burgeoning industrial capitalist society based around the search for profits rather than morals or values (Hauser, 1982: 14). Romantic thinkers set up the new figure of the 'artistic genius' as the hero who would struggle against this dehumanising society (Weiskel, 1976; Berlin, 2000). The Romantics are also responsible in large part for developing the idea of 'Art' with a capital 'A', that is, as a special, almost holy realm, that stands outside and above of ordinary society because of its great spirituality and moral transcendence. This type of Art was seen to be made only by Artists, unique and highly gifted, if not to say deeply neurotic and uncontrollable, persons (DeNora, 1995). The activity of such people, due to its completely unique characteristics, was not and could not be 'compared to the humdrum production of ordinary objects' (Coser, 1978: 225). On this view, the artist is a great individual wholly unlike, and superior to, the common herd, and his products—Art—are seen to be unique individual expressions of his temperament and personality.

We can see from these views that in many ways 'Art' had come to function as a substitute for religion in a society that was becoming in certain ways more secular, and for Art was seen to be almost 'holy' in nature and 'above' ordinary social considerations. In certain ways, 'Art' came increasingly to replace God, at least among the upper classes, and especially the intelligentsia, as the repository of moral values that were seen to be higher than the mere pursuit of money (Horkheimer, 1972). Likewise, the artist replaced religious figures such as prophets as the figure whom one should venerate because of his privileged insights into 'spiritual' and extra-mundane matters.

These views, which developed particularly from the early nineteenth century in large part still inform contemporary understandings of art and artists. The sociology of art seeks to challenge the hold these views have on contemporary understandings of 'art', arguing that we cannot remain beholden to the ideas of the Romantics and their predecessors because their ideas are in some ways mystificatory and have the effect of hiding some of the ways in which what we call 'art' is made, distributed and consumed. Sociologists therefore are interested in demystifying the idea of 'artist'. For example, the notion of 'genius' is seen more as a label attached to particular persons by other people, than an indication of any intrinsic mental or intellectual qualities they may possess (Becker, 1978). Seeing the issue of artistic talent in this way helps explain why in the course of Western history there have been so few 'great' women artists. This is not because women are any less talented than men. It is in part because women were not given the same opportunities to express their creative capacities as men were. It is also because the people labelling certain cultural producers as 'geniuses' tended themselves to be men, and the idea of genius was defined to be a masculine quality. Moreover, the kinds of cultural production that pre-twentieth-century women were channeled into, such as needlework, were not defined as worthy of the honorific title 'art'. In these various ways, a patriarchal bias can be revealed in ideas about 'great artists' (Nochlin, 1973; Martindale, 1978; Parker and Pollock, 1981; Sydie, 1989; Tuchman, 1989; Battersby, 1994).

Another way of challenging the Romantic notion of 'artist' is to emphasise the fact that no 'artist' ever makes their 'art' wholly on their own. They are reliant, directly or indirectly, on a whole series of other people in order to do what they are doing, whether painting a picture or even writing a poem. In other words, we should get away from the myth of the unique and singular 'artist' to examine how particular people who have been labelled as 'artists' are 'artistically' educated and trained (at institutions called 'art schools'), how they seek to make their livings (e.g. by seeking to get their works published or displayed for sale), and how even in their most 'private' and 'creative' moments they are reliant in one way or another on other people and are enmeshed in a whole series of social relationships. For example, Norbert Elias's (1993) study of Mozart stresses the intricate social networks of power and influence that the composer was wrapped up in, such that he often had to
produce music that was pleasing to the people who had commissioned music from him, rather than composing what he himself wanted. Seeing the 'artist's position within complex social networks need not just stress the limitations placed on artists, but can also identify the enabling aspects of the social relationships artists find themselves within. This entails examining how a particular 'artist' is involved within a particular division of cultural labour. Becker (1974: 767) puts this point in this way:

"Think, with respect to any work of art, of all the activities that must be carried on for that work to appear as it finally does. For a symphony orchestra to give a concert, for instance, instruments must have been invented, manufactured and maintained, a notation must have been devised and music composed using that notation, people must have learned to play the notated notes on the instruments, times and places for rehearsal must have been provided, ads for the concert must have been placed, publicity arranged and tickets sold.

The effect of this sociological 'de-centring' of the 'artist' is to show that 'art' is always collectively rather than individually produced. Even the poet toiling away in isolation is dependent on many other people, each carrying out their own particular roles in a cultural division of labour, such as his or teachers who initially nurtured his or her talent, and those who distribute it such that other people can have access to it.

According to many sociologists, the study of what our society calls 'art' can only really progress if we ditch the highly specific and ideologically loaded terminology of 'art', 'artworks' and 'artists', and replace these with the more neutral and less historically specific terms 'cultural forms', 'cultural products' and 'cultural producers' (Williams, 1977: 138; Wolff, 1981: 138; Bourdieu, 1993a). These cultural products - be they paintings, sculptures, forms of music or whatever - should be regarded as being made by certain types of cultural producer, and as being used by particular groups of people in particular ways in specific social contexts. By using the more neutral term 'cultural products' for particular objects, and 'cultural producers' for the people who make those objects, the sociologist seeks to break with a view that she/he sees as having dominated the study of cultural forms for too long, namely trying to understand everything in terms of the category 'art'. This is a category that is too limited and context-specific to encompass all the different cultural products that people in different societies make and use. It is a term that is also too loaded to take at face value and to use naively in study of our own society. Since it is in the interests of certain social groups to define some things as 'art' and others as not, the very term 'art' itself cannot be uncritically used by the sociologist who wishes to understand how and why such labelling processes occur. Quite simply, then, in order to study cultural matters, many sociologists believe one has to reject the terms 'art', 'artwork' and 'artist' as the basis for our analysis. Instead, these terms become important objects of analysis themselves.

'Art' and 'society'

At the most basic level, the sociological study of art involves examining the relations between 'art' on the one hand and 'society' on the other, although this is a very simplified description of what the sociology of art seeks to do (Clark, 1970). More specifically, sociology poses the question: in what ways do social relations and institutions impact upon the creation, distribution and appreciation of artworks? In this section we will look at ways in which we might tease out the relations between the creation of 'artworks' and 'society' (social relations, structures and institutions).

Seeing art 'in its social context' has a long pedigree in studies of art, by both sociologists proper, the 'proto-sociologists' who lived before an identifiable discipline called 'sociology' appeared in the later nineteenth century, and certain types of art historian. If we look at the history of endeavours of this sort, we see that the earliest attempts to relate the creation of 'artworks' to social factors actually related artworks to the cultural, rather than explicitly social, contexts in which they were produced. Perhaps the very first proto-sociologist of art was the early eighteenth-century Neapolitan scholar Giambattista Vico. In Vico's view, every particular culture has its own style, a particular unifying principle, such that all of the parts of the culture, no matter how apparently diverse - its language, religious beliefs, everyday habits and its art - are all informed by the same underlying ideas and attitudes (Berlin, 1976: xvii). For Vico, therefore, the culture is like the 'soul' of the society, its animating spirit, and the art of a society is highly expressive of that soul. From this perspective it is possible to see artistic production more as the expression of the mores and attitudes of the group than of the personal dispositions of the individual maker. The actual person (or persons) who makes the artefact can be seen more as manifesting the mentality of the group in their productions, rather than expressing any kind of 'individual' vision. This is how Vico understood the particular case of the ancient Greek poet Homer. Vico alleged there was actually no such person as 'Homer' at all. The tales associated with that name were the anonymous productions of the oral culture of the early Greeks, produced by many different minstrels and troubadours over a long period of time. Since the 'Greek peoples were themselves Homer', literary works that were seemingly the products of a single 'genius' were in fact artefacts expressive of the folk culture of the time (Vico, 1999 [1744]: 382).

Ideas of this type were subsequently taken up by thinkers in both France and Germany. In the former, figures such as Madame de Stael (1803) carried out studies of literature and the influences upon it of such factors as the religion, legal system and customs of particular cultures. Later in the nineteenth century, Hippolyte Taine, often acknowledged as the foundational figure in the modern sociology of literature, attempted to study the literary artwork not as the 'mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners, a manifestation of a certain kind of mind' (Laurence and Swinney, 1972: 32). The same sort of approach to artworks was also influential in Germany. The philosopher J.G. Herder (1800), one of the foundational figures in the Romantic movement
mentioned earlier, developed the theme of culturally contextualising art by attempting to explain why certain forms of art flourish in particular cultural contexts but not in others. In a similar vein and at around the same time, G.W.F. Hegel (1975a,b) provided an analysis of how the ‘spirit’ of a given culture, especially its ideas of what values are the most noble and praiseworthy, expresses itself most fully and comprehensively in the artworks produced in that culture.

This type of Hegelian analysis has had certain twentieth-century followers in sociology. For example, the work of the sociologist of literature Leo Lowenthal (1957) analyses the development of plays and novels from the sixteenth century onwards, as expressions of the most profound aspirations towards human freedom characteristic of particular periods within European modernity. On this view, works by figures such as Shakespeare or Cervantes contain privileged insights into how people in a particular time and place understood themselves and the world in which they lived (Lowenthal, 1961: xii). One of the founders of modern sociology, namely Max Weber, also sought to locate particular ‘artworks’ in wider cultural contexts. On Weber’s (1958) account of the development of styles of music in the West, he argues that Western music developed in much more rational forms than the music of other civilizations, and is thus reflective of the particularly pronounced rationalistic nature of Western culture. From the Middle Ages onwards, Western music involved a 12-tone scale, unlike in places such as India and China which had a different set of scales and chords. Western composers developed their music on the basis of rational experimentation with the permutations possible within the 12-tone scale. As a result, Western music developed in ways that derived logically from the initial scale patterns. In addition, Weber notes that the ‘orchestra’ is a cultural phenomenon unique to the modern West. Its characteristics are a somewhat ‘bureaucratic’ and rational organization of the different sections (wind, strings, etc.). The ways of composing for this type of musical organisation are inevitably more about rule-following and procedures for attaining harmony than are other types of music-making. Weber argues that the rationalization of Western music is an expression and symptom of rationalization processes that were part of the creation of modern Western culture more generally. The ‘rational’ character of Western art, at least in its musical forms, is expressive of a wider, pervasive culture of high degrees of rationality characteristic of the West (Fehér, 1987).

Ways of approaching art that insist on locating it in its cultural context were not just influential in later sociology, but also in particular sectors of the discipline of art history, illustrating the fact that certain forms of thinking in both disciplines have much in common with each other. An important strain of art historical research in German-speaking countries developed out of Hegel’s version of the need to see art in cultural context. Heinrich Wolfflin was concerned to develop an ‘art history without names’, that is, to see the works of particular artists as the expression of stylistic patterns that were themselves products of wider cultural forces (Hauser, 1985 [1958]: 120, 124). Later exponents of this style of art history, which comes close to sociological

concerns about art and artists, include such twentieth-century figures as Erwin Panofsky and Arnold Hauser (1991). Echoing Vico’s ideas on Homer, Panofsky (1951) argued that the anonymous artisans who designed and constructed the Gothic cathedrals of the European middle ages operated inside an overall cultural mentality that was expressed both in architecture and in scholastic philosophy. The very structural form of the cathedrals mirrored the configurative principles of scholastic thought, the dominant intellectual paradigm of medieval Europe, where each part of an argument is logically deducible from the previous part. In this way Panofsky asserted that architecture as a form of ‘artistic’ practice was wholly bound up with the patterns of thought dominant in wider medieval European culture. Once again, artworks were seen in a contextualising way as expressions of wider cultural forms.

A classic modern example of this sort of thinking is Ian Watt’s (1985 [1957]) study of early eighteenth-century English novels by figures such as Defoe and Richardson. Watt traces the nature of the novel form to changes in wider social and cultural life of the period. For example, earlier authors such as Aphra Behn had named their characters in archetypal ways – e.g. Mr Badman – to demonstrate explicitly the qualities of that person. But an increasing sense of individualism and an increasing awareness of the unique nature of every person that was developing in the wider culture of early eighteenth-century England, was reflected in the new breed of novelists naming their characters ‘in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as particular individuals in the contemporary social environment’ (ibid.: 20). Moreover, Watt sees the novel’s new emphasis on past actions being seen to cause present ones as reflective of innovations in natural science, which pioneered new and more minute descriptions of causation in nature (ibid.: 26). The ways in which the story is told, and the form in which it is presented, are therefore seen as being made possible by wider cultural changes.

Clearly it makes good sense to understand artworks in relation to the culture in which they were made. But one of the problems with analysing artworks in this matter is that the term ‘culture’ is very vague. In addition, claiming that wider cultural factors are ‘reflected’ in the form or content of certain artworks does not show precisely by what means this happened; it is as if the surrounding ‘culture’ always and automatically somehow makes its presence felt in the artwork (Barbu, 1970). On this sort of view, the artist is merely a kind of ‘midwife’, giving voice to the cultural trends of the time. Thus the key problem with these sorts of analysis is that they tend to see a direct and unremitting connection between the wider cultural context out of which artworks have ‘sprung’, and the artefacts themselves.

Another important way of thinking about the relation of the creation of ‘artworks’ and wider ‘society’ comes from the Marxist tradition. Marxian analysis replaces the rather vague focus on ‘culture’ described above, with the more precise claim that artworks are both produced within, and expressive of, the ‘material conditions’ of a society at a given period in time. By ‘material conditions’, Marx primarily meant the social relationships that govern the economic realm of a given society. For Marx (1977 [1859]: 21), it is the
socio-economic ‘base’ of a society which shapes the nature of that society’s ‘cultural superstructure’. The latter is in part comprised of dominant ideologies which disguise the nature of the power held by dominant, elite groups by representing the social order as operating in the interests of all groups in that society. This outlook encouraged Marxist analysts to see artworks as thoroughly ‘ideological’ in nature. What artworks do is embody the ideologies dominant in a given society at a certain period in time. These ideologies are the products of the thinking of particular social classes. For example, Lucien Goldmann’s (1964) famous study of the plays of Racine sought to show that the playwright’s works embodied the tragic vision of life held by the noblesse de robe, a fraction of the French aristocracy whose power was in decline at the period in the seventeenth century when Racine wrote.

The Marxist analysis of ‘material factors’ affecting the nature of artistic production brings with it its own problems. Can artworks really be seen just as automatic expressions of socio-economic relations? After all, this would be to ignore how actual artists go about their labours, making them seem as if they are mere mouthpieces for particular ideologies (Williams, 1977: 97). The specificities and subtleties of particular works of art are lost in what is now generally accepted as too crude a form of Marxist analysis. This way of thinking also ignores the possibility that the world of art exists in ways that are in some senses ‘autonomous’ of, or at least not directly determined by, socio-economic relations. Most twentieth-century thinkers operating within the Marxist tradition have rejected the idea that artworks are direct expressions of the ‘economic base’ of a society or of ‘dominant ideologies’ in the ‘cultural superstructure’. Instead, they have sought to find ways of identifying the relatively indirect and mediated relations between ‘material’, ‘ideological’ and ‘artistic’ factors.

One of the most influential thinkers in this direction was the Hungarian philosopher and art analyst György Lukács. For Lukács (1971 [1923]) the economic ‘base’ does not directly produce the ‘cultural superstructure’. Instead, there is a series of complex relations between each part of a society, which is regarded as a totality. Lukács used the term ‘mediation’ to refer to this state of affairs. Each element of a given society should be seen as part of the whole of that society, that is the social totality. It is the totality that shapes the nature of each of its constituent parts. Therefore each part is not directly shaped by another part, but by the nature of the totality. Consequently, ‘culture’ is not directly shaped by the ‘base’, but by the particular arrangement of other parts of the totality, such as the economic and political systems. They in turn are indirectly affected by the nature of ‘culture’. In other words, there is a series of mediations – indirect relationships – between each part, rather than direct cause-and-effect relations between them. To understand artworks and how they are made, therefore, we must situate their production as one element in a particular social totality, and examine the relations that pertain between the various spheres such as politics, the economy, the education system and the sphere of ‘artistic’ production. What people situated in the latter sphere do at a particular time is dependent on the nature of the overall social totality. As another major Marxist theorist, Theodor Adorno (1967: 30), put it, instead of trying to locate particular ‘artworks’ as being expressive of particular ‘material conditions’ or ‘ideologies’, instead one must ‘decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in [them]’. In other words, artworks express the nature of the social totality, and not of a particular element – e.g., a social class, the economic base – within it. While the views of both Lukács and Adorno are open to question, nonetheless they are expressive of wider Marxist attempts in the twentieth century to produce more refined and nuanced accounts of artistic production than that offered by a rigid application of Marx’s original ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ model.

Most contemporary versions of the sociology of art recognise that in Western modernity there has come to develop a particular social institution called the ‘art world’. This way of thinking draws upon the theme of social structural differentiation, a central idea in macro-sociology, developing out of the work of a range of figures, including Herbert Spencer (1961 [1875]) and Emile Durkheim (1984 [1893]). This is the notion that as modernity evolves, ever more specialised subsystems develop, each of which is an institution oriented around a core activity. This is a movement away from a medieval social structure, where the same institutions carried out more than one form of activity (Szontagh, 1990). In the medieval world, there was no separate institution called ‘art’. Instead, cultural production was bound up with other social spheres, especially that of religion: hence the fact that the overwhelming number of artifacts from this period that modern people call ‘art’ were in fact produced for religious purposes (Williams, 1981: 96). It is only in modernity, and especially from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, that a separate social institution defined by people of the time as the ‘art world’ comes to be established (Luhmann, 2000). Given this, instead of looking in a very general way at the relations between ‘art’ and ‘society’, modern sociology tends to see the problem as involving looking at the relations and connections between the ‘art world’ and other social institutions. Most sociologists also are of the view that in modernity the institution called ‘art’ has become partly, but not wholly, autonomous of other social institutions. The task is to identify a way of thinking about ‘art’ that simultaneously grasps that it has a history of its own, but that that history is connected to and bound up with, the histories of other social institutions.

Many sociologists would agree with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990: 119) analysis of this situation. He argues that the art world is like a little universe unto itself, with its own particular concerns and interests. But it is not totally sealed off from other social ‘spheres’ or ‘institutions’. Instead, when these ‘outside’ spheres (or ‘fields’ as Bourdieu calls them) impact upon the art world (the ‘field of cultural production’ in his terms), they are not directly reflected in it but are refracted. In other words, influences from other fields are always indirect, and work themselves out according to the ways of operation peculiar to the field of cultural production itself. For example, a very rich businessman has a great deal of economic power, and this means he has a lot of power in the specific field called the ‘economy’ (i.e., business and industry). But if he fancies himself as a painter, all his money will probably not be able to buy him the approval of other painters, because what they value is what they define as
'talent', and if they think he has none, his money will make no difference to their evaluation (in fact, it might make them approve of him even less, seeing him as merely a 'rich amateur'). The point here is that factors from outside the art world do have an effect on it, but they are processed by that sphere and work themselves out according to its own 'laws' (or at least, tendencies) of operation. With this kind of analysis, we have moved very far away from a sociological approach that simply wants to find out what the effects of 'society' on 'art' are. Instead, effects on the art world from 'wider society' — that is, other social spheres, institutions and fields — are seen always to be indirect and subject to how the specific dynamics of how the art world itself operates (Anheier et al., 1995).

The 'art world' 

If the modern Western phenomenon called the 'art world' is a social institution in some ways like any other, how should we try to understand how it works? Many sociologists would agree that we can see this sphere as being made up of networks of cultural production, distribution and consumption (Kadushin, 1976; Williams, 1981: 35). The elements of the institution we today call the 'art world' include technologies (e.g. brushes and paints), distribution and display systems (e.g. art dealers and galleries), reward systems (the means by which the benefits that accrue to the artist who has a 'successful' career are organised), systems of appreciation and criticism (e.g. critics writing reviews in newspapers), and audiences (Albrecht, 1970: 7–8). There are of course different subsystems within the overall art world, such as those oriented around particular forms of cultural production, such as painting and sculpture, novels and classical music.

We noted above that such a thing as the 'art world' is a relatively recent development, dating mostly from the middle of the nineteenth century. An excellent empirical study of how a particular 'art world' was erected at a particular time and place is provided by Paul DiMaggio, who gives an account of how an art world differentiated from other social spheres was constructed in the American city of Boston in the later nineteenth century. DiMaggio (1986: 195) notes that in the earlier nineteenth century, there was not yet a clear distinction between 'art' and 'popular culture', nor any forms of social organisation oriented around separating cultural phenomena out into these two spheres. A wide variety of cultural forms were available in a unified and not yet differentiated cultural marketplace. What were later defined as works of 'fine art' appeared alongside more 'vulgar' forms of 'popular culture' such as vaudeville shows. Yet by the end of the century, the Boston upper class had marked off for itself a distinctive cultural territory, by removing what were now labelled as the 'arts' from the commercial marketplace, and locating them inside a network of non-profit corporations. Popular 'entertainments' remained within the commercial realm and were viewed as mere commodities to be sold. Physically, the two realms were differentiated in that while popular 'entertainments' remained in the theatres they had been staged in for some time, new dedicated 'high culture' spaces such as museums, galleries and concert halls were erected to house proper 'arts'. In this way, both physical and symbolic boundaries were established between 'art' and 'popular culture'. As time went on, other cultural forms were reorganised around institutions of 'high culture', such as opera and ballet (Levine, 1988; DiMaggio, 1992). The same sorts of processes took place throughout the Western world at about the same time, both in capital cities such as Berlin, and in provincial centres like Manchester and Birmingham (Wolff and Seed, 1988).

DiMaggio's analysis stresses the role of non-profit organisations and actors, such as city councils and philanthropic donors, in the construction of the sphere of 'art'. But it is equally well the case that the creation of art worlds in different parts of the Western world involved profit-driven factors too. Perhaps the key change in the economics of artistic production from pre-modernity to modernity is the emergence of complex art markets. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, cultural production was carried out at the behest of powerful patrons, such as Popes or rich aristocrats. The cultural producer had to work within certain confines, in that he had to make artifacts that pleased the patron (Henning, 1960). By the nineteenth century, the patronage element in cultural production had gone into decline, and new ways of producing what was now defined as 'art' were in place (DeNora, 1991). Instead of directly producing for a patron, artists now tended to produce for art markets, which were much less personalized than the situation where the producer creates something for a specific person.

An archetypal case here is of a late nineteenth-century painter. Unlike his predecessors who would have produced works commissioned by rich patrons (Haskell, 1963), the painter now relies on other ways of making a living: selling his work to intermediaries such as art dealers, relying on displays in galleries to sell his work to prospective consumers, and making a name for himself with the critics (Taylor and Brooke, 1969; Kramer, 1970; Boime, 1976; Holt, 1981; Wolff, 1981: 139). In such cases, the relationship between 'seller' and 'buyer' has become much more impersonal and indirect than hitherto. In the context of a capitalist market in art, a whole new series of roles in the cultural division of labour appear. It is in the interests of such figures as gallery owners and auction-house managers that a certain artist's reputation be cultivated, so that they can make money out of it. 'Art' and money have always been intertwined, despite Romantic claims to the contrary (Reitlinger, 1961); but from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the sphere of social life called the art world becomes based in novel ways around the profit motive. Artworks, especially those in the visual arts, became forms of investment and speculation for the profit-hungry. In the present day we see many instances of this, from paintings by nineteenth-century figures such as Van Gogh selling for millions of dollars, to the activities of influential buyers like Charles Saatchi having a tremendous effect on the market value of young artists. Art today is big business and the roots of this phenomenon may be traced back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

A classic study that illustrates many points about how art worlds work is Harrison and Cynthia White's (1965) book Canvasses and Careers which
charts how changes in the institutional structures of the French art world of the late nineteenth century helped encourage the development of the Impressionist school of painting. White and White note that for more than two hundred years previously, French painting had been dominated by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Artistic Academies were set up in early modernity in many West European countries as ‘official’ guardians of taste and the artistic ‘canon’ (Pevsner, 1940). The French Academy, which was made up of mature and successful visual artists, enjoyed a monopoly not just over the training of young artists, but also over which styles of painting were allowable and decisions as to which artists were deemed to be ‘great’ or not. The annual competitive exhibition the Academy organised determined a pecking order of visual artists, with those winning prizes deemed to be at the top of the tree. Impressionism was most definitely not the kind of style the Academicians favoured. However, it came to prominence in the late nineteenth century because new ways of making and selling art had developed which bypassed the Academy and thus undercut its power and authority. There were several reasons for this development.

In the first place, far more painters than ever before were flocking to Paris, and this meant that there were more people-painting than the traditional Academic system of competitive exhibition could deal with. These artists needed to earn a living and sought other means of establishing their careers. At the same time, a new middle class public with money to spend had appeared on the scene. This was a public that did not want the large canvases with grand themes that the Academicians thought was the best type of painting; instead, they required paintings to hang in their homes, canvases that were relatively small, decorative, and pleasant to look at. The system that arose to meet the needs of, and to connect, these groups of cultural producers and consumers was the ‘dealer-critic’ system. The Impressionist painters, who could not get a foothold in the Academic system, sold their paintings to a new breed of entrepreneur, the ‘art dealer’. The dealer then sold on the paintings to the middle class public, who often saw in paintings a way of earning large profits speculatively. People in this public were indirectly tutored by a new breed of art critic writing in newspapers and other periodicals not just as to what styles of painting they should like, but also to appreciate the idiosyncracies of the style of particular artists. Whereas the Academy had compelled artists to paint within the confines of certain established rules, dealers encouraged Impressionist painters to make their styles as ‘personal’ as possible, for that way the artworks would be more distinctive and would stand more chance of selling because the middle class purchaser would think he was buying something unique (and therefore something potentially very lucrative). So successful was the new ‘dealer-critic’ system that it brought the older Academic system into a situation of decline. What the Whites’ study illustrates is not only how a particular art world was transformed, but also how factors such as means of exhibition and selling, and artistic ‘supply’ and ‘demand’, can have an effect on encouraging or discouraging particular styles of artistic practice.

Two of the most influential sociologists who have studied the ‘art world’ in recent years are Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker. Bourdieu’s (1993a) analysis of the ‘field of cultural production’ is outlined by Jeremy Lane in his chapter in this book. Here we will confine ourselves to noting that Bourdieu focuses on sets of conflictual relations between different groups in that field, for example, between ‘younger’ and ‘older’ artists (in career terms, rather than personal age), between ‘avant-garde’ and ‘established’ artists (Poggioli, 1971; Bürger, 1984), between those producing ‘art’ and those producing ‘popular works’ (Grana, 1964), and so on.

Although Becker’s (1984) analysis shares many common points with Bourdieu’s, given that his style of sociology derives from the symbolic interactionist school with its emphasis on how people ‘label’ each other and what effects those labels can have, he focuses more on the ‘gatekeeping’ functions of institutions, persons and practices in the art world – art schools, galleries, museums, showings, art critics, magazine and newspaper reviews (Strauss, 1970; Bystyn, 1978; Shrum, 1991). Becker seeks to analyse the processes of definition within this world of who is defined as ‘innovative’ and ‘original’, and who is said to be ‘derivative’ within particular systems. Quite clearly, some people have more power than others to make their definition of artistic quality be accepted by others. Curators of large and powerful galleries can decide which works of art go on public display, or which are included in particular shows. Judges of art competitions have the power to define as legitimate or illegitimate not just particular works of art but also the activities of the people who made them. In such fashions are artistic reputations made or broken. These various institutions and actors have the power to define something as ‘art’, even if to the general public the ‘artwork’ merely looks like a pile of bricks. They have the power of transfiguring an apparently ordinary object into ‘art’ (Danto, 1974). Whether an artist or a work retain their reputation over time is due to whether that label ‘sticks’. As Becker (1984: 366) puts it, ‘a work that lasts a long time is a work that has a good reputation for a long time’, and reputation is malleable and subject to change as the art world itself changes.

Art worlds are made up not only of systems of production and distribution of ‘artworks’ but also of their consumption. The question of how the audiences of particular types of art are to be understood is a complicated one. Here we shall confine ourselves to a brief sketch of what could be said about this issue. Sociologists on the whole reject the idea that ‘great art’ is instantly recognisable, and that all people can spot really good art if given the chance (Hume, 1985 [1757]). They also tend to dispute claims by aestheticians such as Kant (1992 [1790]) that the proper way to engage with art is in a ‘disinterested’ way — that is, that one can look at for example a painting in a ‘pure’ way untainted by anything except wholly ‘aesthetic’ considerations. The sociological rejection of these sorts of views is based on the claim that different groups of people have different sets of tastes and ways of engaging with cultural products. As long as a society is made up of different groups of people with different styles of life, there will therefore never be a consensus as to what is ‘good’ art, nor which is the correct way of engaging with it. There is therefore no single or objective set of criteria that can identify what is ‘beautiful’ or not. Instead, we must ask why and how different groups of people each have
different conceptions of what is aesthetically pleasing (Wolff, 1981: 97). Max Weber coined the idea of ‘elective affinity’ (Wahlverwandtschaft) to set out the problem of why certain groups of people, formed by certain life conditions, like certain types of cultural product and dislike others.

A classic analysis of these issues was provided by Herbert Gans (1978 [1966]). Instead of ranking certain types of culture and taste in a hierarchy, sociology’s job is to describe neutrally what each set of tastes involves, and show how each set ‘fits’ the life conditions of the group that possesses it. All ‘taste cultures’ are to be seen as ‘social facts’ that exist because they satisfy the needs and wishes of some people, even if they dissatisfy those of other people’ (Gans, 1978 [1966]: 263). Gans argued that in modern America there are a whole range of different taste cultures, each of which is associated with a particular social group, ranging from the ‘high art’ tastes of the upper middle class to the ‘lowbrow tastes’ of the lower working class. For Gans, one taste culture is not better than the other, they are simply different ways of engaging with the world and making sense of life.

A similar set of attitudes underpins Bourdieu’s analysis of these issues. Simplifying his analysis somewhat, we can say that for Bourdieu the social position of a person, and how much power and influence they have at their disposal, is dependent on how much ‘capital’ they have. There are two main types of capital. The first is ‘economic capital’ – quite simply, this is how much money one has at one’s disposal. But there is also ‘cultural capital’ – this is how much knowledge one has of ‘high culture’. The dominant group in contemporary societies in cultural terms is the upper middle class, the cultural bourgeoisie. This group is made up of people in the top levels of professions like medicine and law. They are in a position of power over the other main groups in society, the lower middle class (e.g. primary school teachers, nurses) and the working class. This is not only because the upper middle class have more financial power than these other groups, but also because they have more cultural capital too. According to Bourdieu, the cultural power of the upper middle class is constantly reproduced because people in the other classes feel a sense of cultural inferiority. In a class-based society, if one does not have a ‘refined’ accent, then one will feel very ill at ease in the company of those with such accents (Bourdieu, 1991). Likewise, if one lacks knowledge about ‘art’, when in the company of those that do, one may well feel embarrassed and intimated. In this way, argues Bourdieu, the upper middle class oppress the other groups in society not just in economic terms, but in cultural terms too.

Following the line of reasoning developed by Mannheim, Bourdieu asserts that there is nothing inherently good or bad about so-called ‘high culture’. This is simply the form of culture that the cultural bourgeoisie prefer because of their socialisation into a particular set of dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 39). Each class grouping has its own ‘habitus’, the set of dispositions and tastes characteristic of the life conditions of that class. Because the cultural bourgeoisie do not perceive their tastes to be merely the result of such socialisation, they misrecognize their own tastes as both natural and as intrinsically superior to other types of tastes. People in this group exist inside a ‘web of belief’ whereby they take ‘high culture’ truly to be a realm that has a completely objective existence of its own, when actually it is only a product of the dispositions produced by their own habitus (Bourdieu, 1993a).

One of the reasons why the cultural bourgeoisie never regard the culture they favour as being arbitrary is that they periodically engage in rituals that renew their beliefs as to the apparently ‘natural’ superiority of their own cultural tastes. This is achieved through visiting locales that are defined as places where ‘legitimate’ culture can be accessed, such as museums and art galleries (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991; Zolberg, 1992). Places like these are in essence ‘temples of culture’, where the ‘cultured’ come to worship their own refinement. Members of the cultural bourgeoisie feel comfortable in such places, as since childhood they have been made familiar with them, and they possess the capacity to ‘decode’ or interpret what is on offer in such places. Given such knowledge, one can talk about ‘art’ with great confidence, a feeling that people in other classes generally lack. Opinions can be confidently offered as to what the artworks ‘mean’. Particular artists and styles can be connected to other artists and styles. In so doing, people of the cultural bourgeoisie can prove both to him/herself and others just how ‘refined’ she/he is. According to Bourdieu, this is generally not carried out as an ostentatious way of ‘showing off’, but is experienced as a completely ‘natural’ way of behaving. In this manner the trips to galleries and other such places are actually potent ways in which the cultural bourgeoisie maintain their cultural power over other social classes. While many criticisms can be given of Bourdieu’s account, such as its possible over-emphasis on class factors and its assertion that each class has its own distinctive culture (e.g. Peterson and Kern, 1996; Warde et al., 1999), it nonetheless has become a very influential way for sociologists to think about how social relations can influence the ways in which a person’s social position can effect what sorts of cultural forms they like and what they can, or cannot, get out of particular sorts of ‘artwork’

Conclusion

This chapter has afforded an overview of the main themes and perspectives in the sociological study of art. Hopefully it has demonstrated the richness of this field and the many insights it has afforded into the nature of matters ‘artistic’, insights that other academic approaches may downplay or ignore altogether. From challenging the commonsense notions of ‘art’, ‘artist’ and ‘artwork’, through to macro-level discussions of the relations between ‘art’ and social factors and micro-level analyses of the particular dynamics of specific art worlds, sociology has developed a whole series of useful ways of thinking and analytical tools. However, as the contributions in the rest of this book show, the sociology of art in the present day cannot afford to rest on its laurels. It must constantly be in a state whereby it criticises its previous shortcomings and seeks to overcome them by developing new perspectives and analytical models. As we will see throughout the rest of the book, sociologists in the present day are seeking to do just that.