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Bourdieu's Art

Description

"Bourdieu and Art" was a paper written for a graduate class in Art and Literature at York St. John University, York, England, in November 2010. It provides an overview of Bourdieu's work on the logic and symbolic power of the artistic world.

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Bourdieu's Art



The Thames at Westminster (Westminster Bridge), Claude Monet, 1871 (130 Kb); Oil on canvas, 47 x 72.5 cm (18 1/2 x 28 1/2"); Collection Lord Astor of Hever; National Gallery, London

A paper presented at York St. John University
November 2010

Bourdieu's Art

... Bourdieu's approach (to the sociology of culture) is the most comprehensive and sophisticated available. Bourdieu has developed an impressive new synthesis of classical social theory in the light of late capitalism. He offers a welcome relief to anyone suffering from post-Lacanian excess on the issue of the subject.¹ (Fowler, 1997, 1)

Bourdieu's sociology has been labeled, with only a little exaggeration, 'not only the best, but ... the only game in town. (Lasch, 1993:193, cited in Fowler, op, cit, page 2)²

Reading Bourdieu has close associations with the sensation of losing your mind. The words seem to be written in English, there is a noticeable similarity to the logic and grammar with which you are familiar, and the meaning is almost there, but not quite. Strong men and women can be reduced to a permanent state of uncertainty by the experience. At the very least, the willingness to invest what appears to be, in prospect, a great deal of time making sense of any of this, is put into question. So tackling Bourdieu is a daunting and unsettling task. Yet I will claim today that I think the investment is worth it, because he provides one of the most original theories of art of the 20th century. Indeed, I would argue that any thinking artist should have his books on her shelf.

Bourdieu, after all, was one of the most prominent social theorists of his era. Professor at the Collège de France, and a magisterial influence in his discipline, he shaped the work of practitioners across a wide range of intellectual fields. He spent a good deal of his early career investigating artistic perception and cultural consumption. His insights, while they may be unsettling, tend to reinvent the way we think about artistic practices.

Rather than a single theory of art, Bourdieu proposes at least four: a theory of the social origins of the field of art; a theory of art perception; a theory of cultural production; and a theory of consumption and cultural capital, in which art plays a major part. To set the scene, let us first pay attention to Bourdieu's philosophy.

1. Bourdieu's Epistemology and the Impossible Lesson.

Bourdieu never stopped thinking about philosophy. This can be a disconcerting trend. You are in the middle of thinking about photography with him, and he takes you off into another room to talk about Kant or Wittgenstein. Thus it is interesting that in his book on photography, he prefaces this very practical writing about the most popular art by talking about philosophy. He starts with a typical Bourdieu question. We could say that photography is simply an intuitive matter. We buy a camera in a store. We take it out into the street and take a photo. What could be more simple? This 'spontaneous and highly personal activity' hardly needs explanation - it seems like a natural event that explains itself.

¹ Bourdieu was restless and dismissive about much of Lacanian and Derridan-influenced work. Bourdieu and Derrida were close competitors in the field of textual and cultural analysis. Bourdieu once commented that Derrida continually 'crossed borders with empty suitcases', meaning he had little time with people who contented themselves with texts. 'Everything is social', according to Bourdieu, including reading and interpreting texts.

² Pierre Bourdieu : Cultural Economy and Social Change, pages 193-211, in C. Calhoun, E Lipuma and M. Postone (eds.) *Bourdieu : Critical Perspectives*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993.

Amateur photography is an activity practiced by millions throughout the world. What could be more natural?



Bourdieu, instead, wants to claim quite the opposite - that these apparently spontaneous acts that owe nothing to society could not be more structured or reflective of the social.³ Thus the book has little to do with the practice of taking photographs, but rather with the social relations of photography, and the social purposes that the act of taking pictures and making use of their meaning might have. Gonzalez summarizes Bourdieu's thesis:

Because it is a 'choice that praises,' because it strives to capture, that is, to solemnize and to immortalize, photography cannot be delivered over to the randomness of the individual imagination and, via the mediation of the *ethos*, the internalization of objective and common regularities, the group places this practice under its collective rule so that the most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group. (Gonzalez, op. cit., page 126)

In this task of explaining photography, Bourdieu immediately takes issue with the 'false opposition' between objectivism and subjectivism. Sociology sees something 'objective' in the social relationships surrounding photography, yet he is no simple structuralist - he doesn't think humans are mere automatons carrying out prescribed activities designed by some unseen power. He comments :

Sociology is possible as an objective science because of the existence of external relationships which are necessary and independent of individual wills, and perhaps, unconscious (in the sense that they are not revealed by simple reflection), and which can only be grasped by the indirect route of observation and objective experimentation; in other words, because subjects are not in possession of the meaning of the whole of their behaviour as immediate conscious data, and because their actions always encompass more meanings than they know or wish, sociology cannot be a purely introspective science attaining absolute certainty simply by turning to subjective experience ... (Bourdieu, 1990, 2)

What is the nature of this experimentation? Following Claude Bernard, Bourdieu suggests that, like natural scientists, social scientists faces a culture that is largely unknown to them,

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography, a Middle-brow Art*, Stanford University Press (1990/1965), Stanford, California. First published in 1965 by Les Editions de Minuit as *Un Art Moyen*. (Also published by Polity Press, Cambridge, in association with Blackwell, 1990) See also J. A. Gonzalez, A Contemporary Look at Pierre Bourdieu's 'Photography: a Middle-brow Art', *Visual Anthropology Review*, Volume 8, number 1, Spring 1992, pages 126-131.

even if they live in it, and perhaps because they live in it.⁴ Whether they approach the problem of understanding their culture with objective measurements of external behaviour, or whether they seek the truth by 'telling lies', that is, by using indirect questioning, and approaching the truth from various angles, the so-called 'objective truth' is neither available immediately to the observer or to the participant in the field of art.

For art and for anthropology, subjectivity is at the heart of meanings and understandings - what passes for truth. Subjectivity and objectivity are the targets here - the objective meaning of organized activities and behaviours, certainly, but also the way participants make sense of their activities. Together, these understandings constitute the focus of sociological and anthropological work in the artistic field. There are three 'moments' to the scientific enterprise - first, immediate lived experience, in which the participants reveal as much as they hide ; in Bourdieu terms, this world is :

... understood through expressions which mask objective meaning as much as they reveal it ... (Bourdieu, 1990, 4)

Second, the analysis of objective meanings; and, third, the analysis of the conditions that make these meanings possible. Consciousness for Bourdieu is never left alone by social conditions. Agents may think they have complete autonomy, but this is absurd even at first reflection. Thus while we may start with unmediated experience, we soon see patterns of experience between individuals in an artistic field, and this leads to the third question of where these meanings come from - what are the logic(s) behind such meaning systems? And this last question leads us to study the origins of the social fields of art.

Photography has a special location in the field of artistic production because it appears to require less training than professional artists in other fields. Nothing is worse for the status of the field of photography than the image of amateur photography, where the ingénue runs out and takes hundreds of pictures without thought. Yet the apparent randomness of the act of taking photos is routinely limited to certain choices. It is in this process of choice from all the possible objects of study and capture that reveals for Bourdieu the way in which choice operates under a 'collective rule'. Thus when I take students to Paris, and we review photographs taken apparently at random, 80% of the pictures follow a simple rule. They are of individuals photographed with the backdrop of Paris as wallpaper - me next to the Eiffel Tower; me outside of the Louvre, me in a café. The capturing of self in a memorable setting, an attempt to refigure the semiotically general into a personal memory, is a rule routinely followed. However, class, social profession, social background, gender - all these factors of social origin and history cannot be separated from 'the implicit system of values' that surround photography, and which shape its activities. And Bourdieu says:

Unlike fully consecrated artistic activities, such as painting or music, photographic practice is considered accessible to everyone, from both the technical and economic viewpoints, and those involved do not feel they are being measured against an explicit and codified system defining legitimate practice ... hence the analysis of the subjective or objective meaning that subjects confer ... appears as a privileged means of apprehending, in their most authentic expression, the aesthetics (and

⁴ Bourdieu, op. cit., 3.

ethics) of different groups or classes and particularly the popular 'aesthetic'. (Bourdieu, 1990, 7)

But nothing could be further from the truth, Bourdieu wants to insist:

... while everything would lead one to expect that this activity, which has no traditions, and makes no demands, would be delivered over to the anarchy of individual improvisation, it appears that there is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice and amateur photographs ... (indeed) everything seems to obey implicit canons which are very generally imposed, and which inform amateurs or aesthetes as such, but only to denounce them as examples of poor tastes or technical clumsiness. If in these stilted, posed, rigid, contrived photographs of family celebrations and holiday 'souvenirs' we have been unable to recognize the body of implicit or explicit rules, it is probably because we have not suspended an overly limited (and socially conditioned) definition of cultural legitimacy ... there are beautiful ways of ploughing or trimming a hedge, just as there are beautiful mathematical solutions or beautiful rugby manoeuvres. Thus most of society can be excluded from the universe of legitimate culture without being excluded from the universe of aesthetics. (Bourdieu, 1990, 7-8)

So while amateur photography might be excluded from elite codes of artistic definition, it cannot be separated from broader social judgements about what is fine and beautiful, nor can it be separated from the social as the most perfect and unique creation of individual achievement. The aesthetic, then, is only one element, in the broader field of cultural values, or what Bourdieu calls the *ethos*, associated with members of a class,⁵ and more broadly from the system of classes that constitute, for Bourdieu, the entire social hierarchy.⁶ The popular arts allow themselves to surrender to the needs of the market and the practical, while the 'elaboration of "pure" art forms' operates in another direction. Generally considered the 'most noble', pure art forms 'presuppose the disappearance of all functional characteristics and all references to practical or ethical goals'.⁷ Aesthetes are in the business of liberating the practice of photography from the social functions into which it has sunk, and consecrating it as a practice and as an object worthy of separate study.

From all this, Bourdieu concludes, the sociologist must approach photography as a form of practice that must be examined with 'real groups' with ethnographic methods, because the meaning embedded in the activity of taking photographs can only be discerned in such a setting, and not merely by the examination of texts. Thus the analyst must examine the values and beliefs of the practitioners as much as the products themselves. These values and beliefs, in turn, must be seen in opposition to other beliefs and attitudes held elsewhere in society by other groups. Only by assessing the field of aesthetic judgments as a whole can we grasp the social function of art and the process by which these practices come into being.

As we do this, we must avoid the simple writing of rules, just as much as we have already escaped the naïve belief in intuitionism.⁸ Thus as with many of his philosophical setups, Bourdieu has upped the stakes, making it almost impossible for us to do our work. Like the

⁵ Bourdieu, 1990, 9.

⁶ In his later work, and especially in *Distinction*, Bourdieu is going to show that his analysis of class is a very elaborate affair.

⁷ These phrases are on page 8

⁸ Bourdieu, 1990, 9.

bright child who sees through his parent's attempts to manage the world, he provides a rigorous critique, and a plan to do better. Yet this doing better is almost impossible - it requires training, expertise and resources far beyond most of us. Nonetheless, by setting out the field for the sociological analysis of photography in particular, and the field of aesthetic judgement in general, he does open the door onto a new terrain of work, starting with the history of cultural judgement.

2. *The Theory of the Origins of the Artistic Field.*

While Bourdieu's book *The Rules of Art* is subtitled the *Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, it also seeks to establish a 'science of works of art'. Bourdieu claims :

... the principal obstacle to a rigorous science of the production of the value of goods' (is the) charismatic ideology of "creation" to be found in studies of art literature and other cultural fields. (this charismatic ideology) directs the gaze towards the apparent producer – painter composer, writer – and prevents us from asking who has created this "creator" and the magic power of transubstantiation with which this "creator" is endowed. (Bourdieu, 1996/1992, 167, cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2006, 212)⁹

Once this spell is broken, then a sociological view is possible. What comes into focus, however, is not merely other people, but the social field of art as a whole. Thus, following Hesmondhalgh's argument, we do not simply add further individuals to the picture, as Howard Becker and other have done, but rather ask the more complicated a nuanced question – what is involved in creating the creator.¹⁰ As Bourdieu takes this larger task on, he invokes his broad methodological strategy of field, habitus, capital, strategy and struggle.

For Bourdieu, the artistic field is an arena of social activity like any other, but with its own logic and 'rules of the game'. Rather than thinking about particular individuals, or groups of people surrounding the creative artist, the sociological and anthropological task is to unlock the social logic of the field, and to reveal these rules. These rules are layered and complex, but they can be recovered. We must aim to chart out what matters most to those participants in the field of creative activity and what is valued socially (the form of capital operating), the rules, struggles and strategies that participants engage in when they work in this field, a process of analysis, rather than the simple reporting of fieldwork findings.

Bourdieu argues that there are three 'moments' in the history of the artistic field.¹¹ For modern artistic achievement to be understood, it is necessary to begin with the sense of what it was like to try to be an artist in 19th century Europe. With the rise of the new monied

⁹ The connecting text between Bourdieu's words belongs to Hesmondhalgh.

¹⁰ I follow Hesmondhalgh's line of thought in this paragraph. See especially page 212.

¹¹ *The Rules of Art*, Pierre Bourdieu, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996, first published in 1992 by Editions de Seuil, as *Les Règles de L'Art*. Bourdieu starts the preface by saying 'Shall we allow the social sciences to reduce literary experience – the most exalted that man may have, along with love – to surveys about our leisure activities, when it concerns the very meaning of life?' He is quoting D. Salenave, *Le Don de Morts* (Paris, Gallimard) 1991. Bourdieu starts the book by pushing aside 'some of these vapid reflections on art and life ...' (Preface, xv) In fact, Bourdieu wants to assert that a 'scientific analysis of the social conditions of the production and reception of a work of art, far from reducing it or destroying it, in fact intensifies the literary experience'. (Preface, xix.)

classes, talk of practicality and of money swamped everything. Bourdieu uses a quote from Bergeron¹² :

One can cite the testimony of André Siegfried speaking of his own father, an entrepreneur in textiles: 'In his education, culture counted for nothing. To tell the truth, he never had intellectual culture and didn't worry about having any. He was educated, remarkably informed, knew everything he needed for acting on the spot, but the disinterested taste for things of the mind remained foreign to him.' In the same way, André Motte, one of the great patrons of the North, writes : ' I repeat each day to my children that the title of *bachelier* [high school graduate] will never put a piece of bread in their mouths; that I sent them to school to allow them to taste the pleasures of experience, and to put them on their guard against false doctrines, whether in literature, philosophy or history. But I add that it would be very dangerous for them to give themselves over to the pleasures of the mind. (Bourdieu, 1996:48)

Money reigned everywhere, and a single logic seemed to prevail. With the rise of the new Napoleonic imperial presence, and the use of the state and its favours to bestow position on sycophantic writers and painters, the symmetry between money and art was complete.¹³ This is clearly a French history, but it clearly points the way to parallel stories elsewhere. He calls this era a 'structural subordination'. At the same time, the state attacked 'subversive literature', denying access and markets to certain publishers and writers, and driving some of them to ruin.¹⁴ Literary and artistic salons existed but only to fawn on power. In this way 'industrialism ... penetrated literature itself after having transformed the press.'¹⁵

The industrial era, characterized by the system of structural subordination, is not complete, however, and cannot absorb all the educated people developed under the new system of mass education. Some of these individuals are drawn to the literary and artistic life, which leads to a second phase in the development of the artistic field, characterized by Bourdieu as an outcome of the process of autonomization, and a shift in the relation between the political and artistic fields. In a section called 'Bohemia and the invention of an art of living', Bourdieu argues that with the rise of the market, people are freed from old ties, and among the 'very numerous population of young people aspiring to live by art,'¹⁶ there forms a new society created by invention:

... a society of writers and artists in which scribblers and daubers predominate, at least numerically, has something extraordinary about it, something without precedent, and it gives rise to much investigation, first of all among its members. The bohemian lifestyle, which has no doubt made an important contribution (with fantasy, puns, jokes, songs, drink and love in all forms) to the invention of the artistic lifestyle, was elaborated as much against the dutiful existence of official painters and sculptors as against the routines of bourgeois life. (Bourdieu, 1996, 56-57)

Bohemia sets its own rules and does not follow them.¹⁷ People in this life may do nothing or they may create a masterpiece. The society that is created, is focused on the personality of

¹² L. Bergeron, *Les Capitalistes en France (1780-1914)* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. 'Archives, 1978), p. 77.

¹³ Bourdieu, op. cit., 49ff.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, 50.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, 53, is citing Cassagne.

¹⁶ Op. cit., 55.

¹⁷ Class history is dismissed here. Part of Bourdieu's argument is that the negation of familial history is an element in this break.

the individual artist. In one sense this artistic grouping is close to the bourgeoisie because of their training and their taste – indeed in some senses they are the authors of taste, or some part of it. On the other hand, they share their economic misery with the poor.

By the middle of the 19th century a new wave of bohemia has come into being. Bourdieu calls the members of this society ‘... a veritable intellectual reserve army ..’¹⁸ who must of necessity, enter the market and get a job as well as try to live the bohemian life. Together, these two forms of bohemian life, one with some money, the other with none, coexist.

This second Bohemian phase is itself superseded by a third, with closer ties to a new form of market. Artists start to create their own market. Artistic markets, implies Bourdieu, often start in a protean sense among artists themselves, where novel ideas and outrageous transgressions find a welcome. In this way, they make a break with the ordinary that Bourdieu calls ‘The Rupture with the Bourgeoisie’. This third stage of the artistic field separates itself distinctively from ordinary life. Disenchantment sets in, and the members of the community devote themselves entirely to artistic production. This group can only come into being fully as the bourgeoisie start to assert their own values :

Everything was false ... a false army, false politics, false literature, false credit, and even false courtesans .. (Flaubert, cited in Bourdieu, 59)

This ‘break with the bourgeoisie’ also encapsulates a break with bourgeois artists even more fully :

Success and notoriety, almost always paid for by ... servility to the public or the powers that be, he is always a reminder of the possibility always open to the artist of turning art into commerce or of making himself the organizer of the pleasures of the powerful ... ‘There is something a thousand times more dangerous than the bourgeoisie,’ says Baudelaire in *Les Curiosités esthétiques*, ‘and that is the bourgeois artists, who was created to interpose himself between the artist and the genius, hiding one from the other.’ (Bourdieu, 80)

This is ‘an economic world turned upside down’, in which artists finally separate themselves entirely from commerce, and ‘refuse to recognize any master except their art’.¹⁹ In such a world, the market for these individuals disappears. If something is ‘without price’, then by definition it cannot be bought and sold. No money exists in the world to buy it. Artists make a virtue out of necessity. In this double world of art and money, the one the inversion of others, a form of realism takes place around the writing of Flaubert, who wrote ‘to tell the story of the world as it is’ without blemish or artifact. He resented the label of realism, yet his flattened writing style was shocking to those who read it because of its banality. Can ordinary life, unblemished and unvarnished, be interesting? It was his writing the mediocre well²⁰ that comprised his aesthetic program.

Similarly in art, Bourdieu wants to say, Manet confronts the world as it is.²¹ Manet is revolutionary for Bourdieu. He is responsible, on this count, for shaping the field of aesthetic production away from an external form of hierarchy established by the academy

¹⁸ Op. cit., 57.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, 81.

²⁰ Bourdieu’s phrase, page 94.

²¹ Bourdieu, 105.

and the orthodox views of the day, and constructing an arena of autonomous judgements among artists. This shift created for Bourdieu an artistic field in which no claim to an ultimate authority could be made, and in which no 'tribune of last appeal' existed.²² There were no gods in the pantheon of aesthetic tastes to be applied to for final judgement :

Manet wrecks the social foundations of the fixed and absolute point of view of artistic absolutism (just as he wrecks the idea of a privileged place for light, from now on appearing everywhere on the surface of things): he establishes the plurality of points of view, which is inscribed in the very existence of a field ... (Bourdieu, 133)

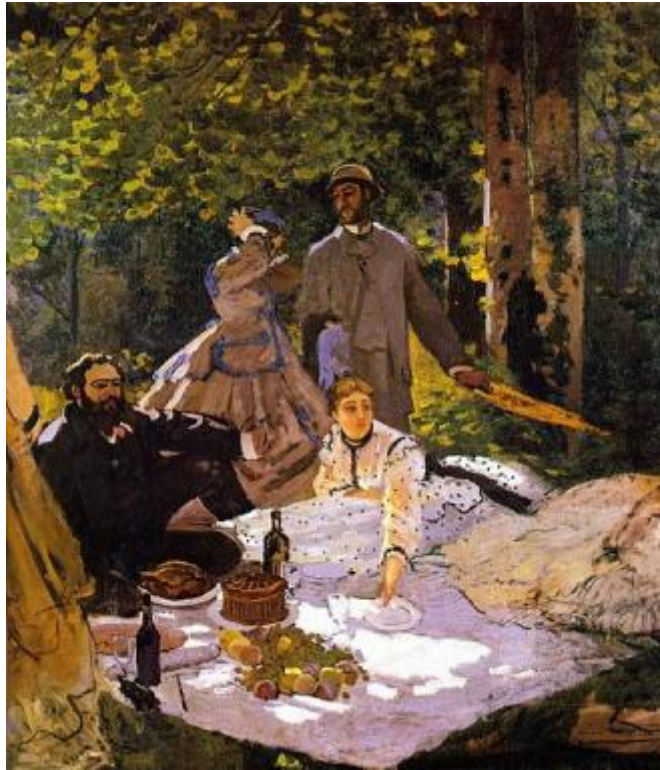
There is much more that Bourdieu has to say about the rise of the artistic field, but it is at the moment sufficient to draw two conclusions. First, Bourdieu wants to insist on the historicizing of the rise of the artistic field, bringing society round the creative individual, and arguing that their work only makes sense in this context. Second, Bourdieu wants to claim that, at least in France, and especially in the late 19th century, and with the rise of overwhelming industrialization, the autonomy of the artistic field was established by revolutionary artists like Flaubert, Baudelaire and Manet, who made clear through their work what the social determinants of the artistic field might be, and the relative power that artists might have to shape the capitals and the values of the creative field.

²² Bourdieu, 132.



Edouard Manet's familiar '*Déjeuner sur L'Herbe*' (1863) was shocking for a variety of reasons. Nudes in paintings in themselves were not offensive to orthodox society. But the use of the artist's wife as the model, and the use of other family members, all fully dressed, was alarming. The obvious reading is that the juxtaposition of the orthodox and the erotic was disturbing. Bourdieu wants to claim a secondary reading is most important – that Manet's attack on orthodox values in art (the picture is redolent with familiar classical tropes) is more than a singular action, but rather the start of a new form of artistic field.

The painting inspired Claude Monet to paint his own, and somewhat more orthodox version, of the same scene. (1866, Musee D'Orsay.)



3. *Reading the Artistic Codes.*

Bourdieu's second contribution to the sociology of art lies in his theory of artistic perception.²³ Here Bourdieu is on a completely different tack. We face a painting, and Bourdieu is at our shoulder. What do we bring to the process of recognition? Bourdieu argues, from the very first paragraph, that we are unable to decipher a painting completely except in that very rare circumstance that we share the codes of the painter entirely. What do we see when we face an iconic Hindu depiction – complications beyond our understanding unless we happen to be Hindu, or knowledgeable about religious iconography. What about a painting of the three magi and Jesus?²⁴ If we know something of the Christian tradition, we can make sense of the surrealistic nature of the painting, with the infant Jesus floating in mid-air, surrounded by golden rays. We read paintings in the light of historical conditions and our own history. These unconscious rules that 'competent beholders of our societies'²⁵ understand make these forms of analysis possible. We can only get close to a 'full' understanding of a work of art, whatever that means, when our artistic competence approaches that of the artist.

Since this set of conditions rarely obtains, misrecognition is the normal state of affairs. Works of art are coded, either through some socially agreed set of meanings that artists, or people in the artistic community share, or coded according to a private set of meanings nestled away in the artist's consciousness.²⁶ Those not in the know seek in painting a realist interpretation of works of art because such interpretations conform to existing understandings of the world.

Those with an education finds themselves at ease with such a condition. With a scholarly background, they are willing to 'do the work' required to interrogate the code, to unlock the cultural puzzle. The 'fresh eye' is delusional for Bourdieu, because this view overlooks the taken-for-granted understandings that sit on our nose like a pair of spectacles.²⁷ Things go unnoticed. Similarly education, social background, the cultivated point of view become as natural and familiar as air, and just as hard to see.

²³ From *The Field of Cultural Production : Essays on Art and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, and especially Part 3, 'Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception'.

²⁴ Bourdieu, 1994, 1.

²⁵ Bourdieu, 1994, 2

²⁶ Bourdieu is unlikely to agree that individual consciousness is not a product, at least in part, of shared social understandings, however.

²⁷ Op. cit., 3.



Las Meninas, the painting by Velasquez in 1656, takes up the first chapter of Foucault's *The Order of Things*. Widely analysed by many, Foucault's take on the painting is directly useful to us here.²⁸ This is a painting in the Madrid palace of Philip IV. The Infanta is surrounded by various helpers and a dog. The King and the Queen are seen reflected in a mirror. The painting plays with the audience. Instead of the audience simply seeing and analyzing the painting, the painting studies us. For Foucault, the painting represents a new kind of thinking.

Works of art, therefore, require the establishment of social codes, to which we may have affinity, or from which we separate ourselves. To move from a simple meaning in a painting to a second order understanding suggests we need to think semiologically. Bourdieu calls innocent readings, and the self-satisfied arrogance that is often associated with them 'the dogma of the immaculate perception.'²⁹ Bourdieu distinguishes between *enjoyment* and *delight* in the way people react to art.³⁰ *Enjoyment* reflects immediate sensation and pleasure, *delight* the slower, scholarly savouring that art may instigate. Art competence, then, is the degree to which individuals have hold of the assets required to judge art completely, or as completely as it might be possible. In an innocent reading, the signifier signifies nothing. It gives off no meanings other than its literal sense. People know what they like. Artistic competence

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things : an archaeology of the human sciences*. (Vintage, 1973, New York.)

²⁹ Bourdieu, 1996, 5.

³⁰ Bourdieu, op. cit., 6.

allows access to the flood of meanings that may potentially flow from a painting. Periodicity is crucial. An understanding of history is an essential component of this artistic competence.

The social nature of this artistic competence is underscored by Bourdieu's interpretation.³¹ If each society has its own understandings, its own particular way of reading artistic texts, then the social nature of this 'reading' is readily apparent. To read historical works, then, is to uncover the social meaning of an era :

“Nowadays we need some instruction to appreciate the Gregorian chant ... but when a melody enters easily into frameworks to which we are accustomed, there is no longer any need to reconstruct it, its unity is there and the phrase reaches us as a whole ... (de Schloezer, cited in Bourdieu, op. cit, 11)

The reading of art is especially fraught because, besides the periodicity and historicity of social meaning, there are various 'breaks' and schools that freight artistic interpretation. Classical periods are followed by 'periods of rupture,'³² in which new methods, new rules and new systems of agreement are put into place, if only for a moment, before being superseded by new reasonings and new understandings. Educated people, says Bourdieu, are always behind the game of understanding unless they remain in the field, and continue reinventing their understandings. Indeed, sometimes, they need to :

... wait for the work itself to deliver the key for its own deciphering. (Bourdieu, 13)

In the first stages, this understanding comes only to a few 'virtuosi', and this process is social as usual. Thus meanings may remain closeted with a few analysts depending on the social importance of the work. The trick is to hold in abeyance not just the codes of everyday life, but of past artistic experience as well, in order to let the new codes enter the system of meaning.

The mastery of artistic interpretation is largely unconscious and denies the existence of rules or laws. It is an 'art', and one absorbs it through the skin. By repeated viewings of art work, by being in the art world, we give ourselves up to artistic understandings and become part of them. Originality denies formula ; it claims for itself a separateness, a distinction. But the formation of a style or a school requires a use of rules, however tenuous and uncertain, that tie separate distinct artworks together.

Even when art is not formally taught to the educated classes, there is still amongst its members a predisposition to understand, to be sympathetic and to interpret what is seen.³³ A *cultivated disposition*³⁴ is a part of the habitus, an enduring element in the durable dispositions that educated people hold, and which allows them access to cultural universes otherwise closed off to them. Without this disposition, art galleries, lectures on Bourdieu, and the purchase of paintings are beside the point. And while the painters already sanctified by the academy, the market and by tradition are favoured by the educated classes everywhere, it is only the most rarified, the most educated, the most discerning who valorize modern painting that everywhere break the mould.

³¹ Op. cit., 10.

³² Op. cit., 13.

³³ Op. cit., 17.

³⁴ Op. cit. The italics appear in Bourdieu's original text.

Art education thus favours those who, by the cultural capital already endowed in their family settings, are predisposed to accept the need to understand these fields.³⁵ Art students at the highest levels of education have been *selected* and *reselected* for these traits, and these traits are clearly not innocent of social class. Education transmits these codes, but agents must be ready to hear them. *Culture becomes natural*. This group, argues Bourdieu, are the most likely, therefore, to believe in *charismatic ideology*, the understanding that great art comes from genius, that magical quality that resides in the individual and which bursts out when the conditions are right. It is the belief in art as the realm of the elect, who have the natural powers to succeed. It is a 'gift of nature'.³⁶ But, reminds Bourdieu :

To remember that culture is not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become; to remember the social conditions which render possible aesthetic experience ... to remember ... that only a few have the real possibility of ... taking advantage of the works exhibited in museums – all this brings to light the hidden forces of the effects of the majority of culture's social uses. (Bourdieu, op. cit., 23)

Distinction comes last, by affording art this 'mark of difference' that 'sets people apart from the common herd'.³⁷ Art becomes canonized and sacrosanct once the social process of validation and consecration has set in. The high priests of the culture line up to pay obeisance, to speak of the new voice in town, the fresh talent, the break with the past. Once the social conditions are set, then the museums and the art galleries have their marching orders. Museums are mausoleums of consecrated value for Bourdieu :

Everything, in these civic temples in which bourgeois society deposits its most sacred possessions, that is, the relics from a past which is not its own, in these holy places of art ... everything combines to indicate that the world of art is as contrary to the world of everyday life as the sacred is to the profane. (Bourdieu, op. cit., 25)

Museums are replete with religious rituals. The absolute prohibition against touching, the required silences, the reverential tones, the 'grandiose solemnity of the decoration and the decorum',³⁸ all this completes the setting in which the process of deification is finished. This is a place somewhere separate. We come here to get away. My sister-in-law, trained as a art historian, told me she chose this path because it seemed the calmest, quietest, most peaceful place she could find. The smallest of the smallest elite end up here.

Entry to such a universe does not depend on the entrance fee. Hidden behind the 'democratic language' of access, such a universe is hidden by structured knowledge, separated by feelings of anxiety and exclusion. Such assertions of entitlement or the lack of it have a history, and a history that cannot be overcome easily. It is the way that democratic states pretend to throw off their 'aristocratic past'.³⁹

³⁵ Op. cit. 20. This is part of Bourdieu's larger theory of cultural capital seen widely elsewhere, especially in his books on education.

³⁶ Op. cit., 22.

³⁷ Op. cit., 24. Art and economics, are, as usual, orthogonal dimensions in the struggle for social difference and separation.

³⁸ Op. cit., 25.

³⁹ Op. cit., 27.

4. *The Theory of Cultural Production*

A theory of cultural production is already evident in the account we already have of the genesis of the literary and creative field. Politics, economics and the artistic overlap and bother each other as sites of struggle and competition. The emergence of the field of cultural production might be said to result from this engagement, and the various distinct positions that creativity as a field takes towards these interventions. But what needs to be said here is what Bourdieu adds to this historical account. This leads us more generally to his theory of the field, and to his articulation of the role of strategy and struggle in this account, two neglected but essential elements of his general theory.

To move in this direction, we need now to understand a little more about Bourdieu's theory of the field. So, to begin at the beginning. Imagine a game of football or netball or golf. You play when you are young because you like it, you continue playing because it's fun. You go to a school where you are asked to play. You become good at it. The rules fall away, and you have a 'sense for the game'. This metaphor of the game is the simplest way into Bourdieu's general theory of culture and cultural production. Actors enter such a field because they find it interesting. They may later remain in the field because of history, tradition, too much invested to leave, or because their love turns into a vocation and a way of paying the gas bill. Through this history they acquire forms of habit, and are able to place themselves strategically in the field and work on the very nature of the field itself. As he sets out the field of cultural production, Bourdieu provides us with methodological tools such as these. All fields and all games have rules, art included - things that matter and things that don't.⁴⁰

So people enter games or fields, learn the rules of the games, learn the stakes (capitals) that are in play, and become different as a result. They develop a form of consciousness he calls habitus,⁴¹ a set of dispositions or attitudes that enable them to function and act in this new field. Armed with this knowledge, the understanding of the stakes in play, and a sense of the shape of the 'field', they are ready to take their place in it. But furthermore, given his interest in social practice, Bourdieu also wants to underscore the fact that agents devise plans to move in various directions in this field, (strategy) and to overcome the forms of domination that they experience in this setting (struggle). The outcome will be that through their resulting practice, they will shift the very nature of the field itself, and thus the rules of the game.

This is Bourdieu's methodology in a nutshell. But how does this explain cultural production? Bourdieu creates for us an economy of symbolic practices. He explains the values of the things in this field, and how these objects of value are bought and sold. Cultural production can be of two kinds ; it can be aimed at the broad field of cultural consumption (society in general) and it can be produced, on the other hand for a limited

⁴⁰ His break with structuralism, always mentioned but rarely fully understood, implies that while, like Marx, Gramsci and many others, he fully accepts the overwhelming force of political and economic domination in everything we do, he does not accept the hyper-determinism of Althusserian logic,⁴⁰ or the intellectual Stalinism of his era. This means that active agents are central in his account.

⁴¹ We should be careful here. 'Habitus', a central idea in Bourdieu's lexicon, may be thought of somewhat differently from the way I have described it in the text. It refers to durable dispositions - commanding viewpoints, we might say, that direct action. People enter these fields of activity with already-existing sets of habitus, but these ideas will change decisively if they commit to the life of an artist, for example. Habitus is formed from personal and social history, but also from human agency.

field (Bohemian art). As we have seen above, there was a period in the field of 19th century artistic production when most of the products were 'bought and sold' among the artists themselves.⁴² When institutions of art, galleries, museums, academic institutions, they are, together with the artists, capable of valorizing and pricing the objects in the art market, thus establishing the groundwork for a large art market that diffuses more broadly into the art world. We may not own a Hockney painting of a swimming pool, but thousands know what they look like, and thousands buy copies and adorn their rooms with them. The most elite art diffuses widely if the institutions of art make it so. Thus the economy of symbolic goods is expanded from the limited field to the public field.

Classes are never far from Bourdieu's story about cultural production. Bourdieu argues that cultural producers embody class backgrounds as part of their social habitus. But as well as private subjectivities, the field of cultural production also has a connection to social classes represented in the political and economic fields. There is always domination, but these forms of domination are complicated because Bourdieu's theory of classes is very far from Marx's foundational work. We now need to think of classes comprising a constellation of dimensions that include status, cultural capital, political, social and economic elements. Fractions of social classes figure largely in his account. So while this shadowy story of class is never far away, it is not the account our grandmothers were familiar with, nor has it dissolved into Post-Fordist hyper-democracy.

But what we are left with in Bourdieu's theory of cultural production is an analysis with an absence at its center. We are told in some detail about the conditions under which cultural production takes place, its origins and the other fields which press up against it. But what we lack is a detailed case study of a particular site of production. Though Bourdieu is clearly a thoroughly empirical sociologist, he seems to have forgotten to follow his own advice in this case. An exception, perhaps, can be found⁴³ in his somewhat desperate study of television in the late 1990's (Bourdieu, 1998).⁴⁴ It has all the appearance of desperation because of its highly-charged political character, and its deeply disappointing intellectual quality. Having spent a lifetime avoiding the easy sponsoring of political causes, of signing petitions, and of speaking at every public event for the sake of what he routinely considered to be empty gestures. In the 1990s, dismayed at the rise of the neoliberal agenda, he turned his scorn onto television and television journalists. This is thus a study of both producers and consumers, with the primary focus on the structure of production. He also undertook the study, he explains, because he was allowed to present his findings on television under conditions entirely of his own making. He begins his report by setting out the 'normal limits' of the television medium, and the delineations within which this practice must occur. There is political and economic censorship to contend with, as well as a great deal of censorship. But then Bourdieu turns the camera on journalists and suggests that what is most uncomfortable about the process is becoming the object of study in a sphere they are normally acting to objectify others. His main target is symbolic violence, which he defines as '... violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents ...' He surveys the attitudes and tacit beliefs (one might say habitus) of the journalists that search endlessly

⁴² But see also Scott Lasch's article cited above, and especially pages 195-197.

⁴³ One could argue that Bourdieu's study of the 19th century field of artistic creativity might be such a work. Whether the limited work he undertook on Flaubert, Baudelaire and Manet constitutes such a study is uncertain. There is certainly an absence of studies of contemporary artistic production.

⁴⁴ *On Television*, New Press, New York, 1998

for the 'exceptional' to capture the attention of the public. But instead of interviewing journalists directly, Bourdieu engages in a secondary form of critique, drawing on studies completed by Patrick Champagne and others in his research group. He illuminates the 'reality' effect of television, through which the exceptional is made real and believed by the large majority of viewers.

For Bourdieu, the individual journalist does not exist in any meaningful sense. Instead there are :

... journalists who differ by sex, age, level of education, affiliation and 'medium'. The journalistic world is a divided one, full of conflict, competition and rivalries. (Bourdieu, 1998 : 23)

But even though there is competition and rivalry, Bourdieu finds a homogenizing effect operating to produce absurdly similar images wherever you look. In the newspaper business, the newspapers talk to one another and react to what other people print. This 'game of mirrors' produces a kind of 'mental closure'.⁴⁵ He concludes :

If television rewards a certain number of *fast-thinkers* who offer cultural 'fast food' - predigested and prethought culture - it is not only because those who speak regularly on television are virtually on call - The list of commentators varies little (and) these 'authorities' spare journalists the trouble of looking for people who really have something to say, in most cases younger, still unknown people who are involved in their research ... these are the people who should be sought out ... (Bourdieu, 1998 : 29-30)

He examines the 'entirely bogus' world of debates that are not debates at all, but rather discussions between people who share the same world view.⁴⁶ He underlines the way in which the social agents in the world of debate, journalism and television all inhabit the same social habitus, work by the same rules and accept the same fundamental - they have in short, the same world view. He concludes :

Today television has carried to the extreme .. a contradiction that haunts every sphere of cultural production. I am referring to the contradiction between the economic and social conditions of transmission for the products obtained under these conditions. (Bourdieu, 1998 : 36-37)

So while the profession of journalism is full of people who defend their independence from markets and power and managers, nonetheless, he has exposed the circuitry that places the market in charge of the message.

While Bourdieu's book does not follow his own method closely, it nonetheless provides us with an idea of how a case study in the production of culture might look using Bourdieu's assumptions.⁴⁷ Coupled with his set of theoretical tools, we are now in a position to examine

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 1998 : 24. The French example is surprising. Certainly, as in London, the papers themselves take entirely predictable lines on most key issues. But it is hard to argue that L'Humanité, the Communist newspaper, shares close views with Le Monde, which tends to the center-right.

⁴⁶ Bourdieu, 1998 : 30ff.

⁴⁷ Bourdieu's book is disappointing for many reasons. It falls at the first hurdle by saying the obvious at very great length. Its intellectual quality is flimsy compared to the work he has already completed. And the colloquial style falls into the trap that he has set himself by playing into the criticism that he himself is creating 'cultural fast food'. And indeed, since he was able to make this critique on national television without constraints, his own experience rather tests the very case he is making. The book led to a very substantial body of criticism.

specific locations and time periods in which cultural production takes place. Schools of art, and particular groups of creative agents, can now be seen in a clearer light, because the great value in Bourdieu's general theory is that it allows us to escape the 'prison house of thought'.⁴⁸ Instead it sets us on the path to empirical investigation that might include ethnography and interviews, mapping, semiological analysis, the study of visual texts, work practices, the social elements of imagination, cultural markets and cultural meaning. What will result is a vision of the artistic universe not as the domain of the genius of individualism, but instead comprising a series of activities with their own sets of rules, capitals, struggles, values - a whole economy of symbolic practice that can now be understood not in pieces, but as a particular instance of a much larger understanding. We can see art's place in the world, and for good reason.

5. Cultural Consumption

Bourdieu's work on cultural consumption may end with his masterwork *Distinction*, and *On Television* (1998), but it certainly starts much earlier with one of his first pieces of work on cultural consumption that was carried out when he was a young professor in Lille.⁴⁹ One can see in this early work a cynical appraisal by a cultural outsider who plans to scale battlements of French culture to understand what keeps outsiders out. He taught in Lille from 1962-1964, and while there, began studies on patterns of consumption in the museum world and in photography.⁵⁰ The book on photography⁵¹ studied camera clubs in Lille, and showed that the social functions to which photographic activity were put varied by social class.⁵² In a second book from this period, Bourdieu also examined a series of art galleries.⁵³ The book contained national surveys of gallery use, and argues that the internal codes of the scholastic world exclude those without the education and background break them. He argues that this leads to a 'categorical duality' and an 'immutable cultural universe, in which the barbarians co-exist with the 'civilized'.⁵⁴ Bourdieu uses an early version of his cultural reception theory outlined above to show the mechanics by which this division takes place.

However, his major work on cultural consumption rests with his ethnography of France, *Distinction*.⁵⁵ This magisterial effort is perhaps the culmination of Bourdieu's achievement overall and stands on its own as an attempt to understand the stylistic apparatus and cultural choices of an entire nation. It makes typically bold assertions :

⁴⁸ Hall, S., 1986, 532, cited in Fowler, op. cit, page 2. The reference is to Stuart Hall's 'Cultural Studies : Two Paradigms', pages 520-538, in N.B. Dirks, G. Eley and S.B. Ortner, (eds.) *Culture/Power/History : A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

⁴⁹ After his initial foray into fieldwork in Algeria, a result of his conscription into the French Army, Bourdieu found himself teaching in Lille, and he used Lille as his second laboratory

⁵⁰ These three years of work are largely neglected in biographical accounts. Yet Bourdieu was already working on the broad epistemological arena for which he later became noted, as well as his studies of education.

⁵¹ *Photography : a Middle-Brow Art*, op. cit.

⁵² See 'Aesthetic Ambitions and Social Aspirations : The Camera Club as a Secondary Group', Robert Castel and Dominique Schnapper, pages 103-128.

⁵³ See Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pages 132ff. Bourdieu published *The Love of Art* with Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990.)

⁵⁴ These phrases come from Judith Blau's review of the work. *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 97 (3) November 1991, pages 894-894.

⁵⁵ *Distinction*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1984. The book on journalism also examines cultural consumption in the realm of television, as we have seen.

"Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed." (Distinction, 1984, 6)

Using a raft of information from a variety of sources, but primarily from a national survey, Bourdieu provides an overwhelmingly convincing story of the relation between social class and taste in the wide range of situations that form the cultural economy.⁵⁶ He uses his typical format of pastiche. Photographs are mixed with abstracted ethnographic interviews, that are mixed with statistical data, diagrams and charts. Various voices seem to be coming at us, all this in an environment of some philosophical complexity. Jenkins calls this a picture of 'class lifestyles', and to some extent this is true. But the classes Bourdieu has in mind are hardly the classes that Marx provided for us some 100 years earlier. Indeed, in writing *Distinction*, Bourdieu is forming these classes before our eyes. Social classes are, for him, formed in large part by the taste, the social status, the cultural consumption patterns that they exhibit, and they are not to be read from simple economic status. Moreover, Bourdieu makes use of class fractions, and dominated and dominating elements within a class to suggest a full elaborated class structure spread over several forms of capital - social, economic, cultural and political, to name the most obvious sources. The result is dazzling and confusing. The flood of ideas and evidence is overwhelming and convincing in a general sense. The evidence to some extent explains that which we already know. We can imagine Bourdieu himself facing the world of museums and high culture, and teaching himself rapidly how the cultural codes he was examining can be broken. Perhaps anyone who has entered an art gallery for the first time has had similar experiences.

But clearly here Bourdieu has wider ambitions. He wants to explain nothing less than the cultural preferences of the whole French population over the wide range of arenas in which taste is displayed, from the cars that are bought, to the furniture that is sat in, the food that is bought and consumed, the clothes that are worn, and the education they want for their children. Bourdieu sees in all this a fundamental source of social identification, a mechanism that separates and distinguishes us from others and brings us together with common-minded people.

Cultural consumption broadly conceived, therefore, is much more than a charming afternoon in an art gallery or participation in a Jane Austen book club. It is, instead, the process by which we identify ourselves as human, a terrain in which we struggle for recognition and distinction, and for many, an arena in which we are dominated, discarded and from whose highest reaches we are excluded. As Jenkins usefully points out,⁵⁷ whether Bourdieu is talking about the Algerian peasantry, Béarnais marriage strategies or the high culture of Paris, he invokes the same method - the way in which our choices are shaped by our background, our social condition and our attempts to escape them. Through this endless set of choices, ambitions, desires and disappointments, we construct the field of social possibilities and social barriers that we routinely inhabit.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, 138ff.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, 141.

6. *Brilliant Originality : Where Bourdieu's arguments might lead.*

I want to end by outlining some of the possibilities that originate in Bourdieu's work for research in the cultural arena. I do this simply and briefly by summarizing research already undertaken using Bourdieu's work - there are literally thousands of examples from all over the world.⁵⁸ Here are four examples that are illustrative :

1. Derek Robbins studies the English intellectual field in the 1790.⁵⁹ Robbins latches on to Bourdieu's theory of cultural tastes. Robbins very usefully reflects on the way Bourdieu might be used by others in his preliminary remarks,⁶⁰ before going on to examine Coleridge's work, suggesting further avenues of analysis that would make Bourdieu useful outside the French context. He concludes :

Bourdieu's work can be used to produce new insights into our own cultural history and our own cultural present ... he provides an example of the way in which we can seek to articulate an engagement with our own culture which is an authentic expression of our position in it. (Robbins, 197)

2. Nick Prior examines the rise of an Edinburgh artistic elite during the period 1826-1851.⁶¹ He wants to work out the 'socio-genesis of the National Gallery of Scotland' and does this using Bourdieu's theory of the field. This approach allows him to identify key players in the game, the debates about what constitutes art and what does not, the role of artists in this agenda. Prior examines how the dominant forms of capital were established, the emerging power of artists as a collective voice and the rise of the middle classes eager to become engaged in a new field of cultural distinction. Prior usefully shows that it is important that the concept of the 'field' be 'put to work' in concrete circumstances, just as Bourdieu would have claimed. He comments :

By entering a plane of analysis inspired by the field concept it becomes possible to render fine-grained sociologies of art that transcend the mistakes of formalism and determinism. Bourdieu's 'labour of objectification' (1996: 207) is indeed producing the goods. (Prior, 159)

3. From further afield, Australian social scientists been widely influenced. John Frow, Tony Bennett and Michael Emmison wrote *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures*,⁶² which looks at contemporary cultural consumption. Ghassan Hage uses Bourdieu's concepts in his *White Nation : Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multi-Cultural Society*, a study that argues whiteness to be a privileged social category that can be accumulated bought and sold like any other form of capital. Leigh Dale's study *The English Men : Professing Literature in Australian*

⁵⁸ As an example, I am presently examining a doctoral thesis from a small university town in New Zealand that uses Bourdieu's model of cultural capital to examine marketing practices.

⁵⁹ 'The English intellectual field in the 1790s and the creative project of Samuel Taylor Coleridge - an application of Bourdieu's cultural analysis', in Bridget Fowler's *Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture*, Blackwell/Sociological Review, Oxford, 2000

⁶⁰ Robbins, 191.

⁶¹ Fowler, op. cit. 'A Different Field of Vision; gentleman and player in Edinburgh, 1826-1851'.

⁶² Cambridge, New York, 1999. Ghassan Hage's book was published by Routledge in New York in 2000. Leigh Dale. 1997. *The English men professing literature in Australian universities*. ASAL literary studies. Toowoomba, QLD: Association for the Study of Australian Literature. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/38410239.html>. Mark R. Davis. 1997. *Gangland: cultural elites and the new generationalism*. St Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Universities and Mark Davis's *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* also make use of his work. Indeed, according to Bridget Rooney, 'cultural capital' and 'the literary field' are now everyday commonsense terms.⁶³

4. In Germany, Ingo Moerth and Gerhard Froehlich have edited *Das Symbolische Kapital Der Lebensstile : Zur Kulturesozioologie der Moderne Nach Pierre Bourdieu*,⁶⁴ which is a compilation of some fifteen studies in the sociology of art, including topics ranging from sado-masochism to lifestyles to photography to domestic life. The collection suggests very clearly how this generative method can be used in a variety of settings.

Bourdieu, in the end, has provided not so much a theory, but a generative mechanism. It offers us useful equipment to use in our studies of the art world. Our job is to provide the content, the imagination and the creativity to make use of this opportunity.

⁶³ This summary is taken from Bridget Rooney's posting at <http://www.politicsandculture.org/2010/08/10/breaking-social-spells-pierre-bourdieu-1930-2002-2/>, accessed on November 7, 2010.

⁶⁴ CAMPUS-Verlag; Frankfurt/Main - New York, ISBN 3-593-34964-7 (311 pages), DM 39,80,