PIERRE BOURDIEU AND CULTURAL THEORY

Critical Investigations

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2

BOURDIEU’S CULTURAL THEORY

In this chapter I shall be primarily concerned with the effects of literary and artistic canonisation and with the ways in which this has cemented the claims to power of the dominant class through its superior grasp of certificated knowledge. In particular, it will be shown through Distinction that appreciation of modernist works is restricted to other artists and to those with high educational capital. I shall try to show, through highlighting Bourdieu’s transgressive method, that knowledge of modernism requires a grasp of iconography that can only come from understanding the old. Moreover, it will be shown that the same taste (avoidance of the facile, refinement, originality, etc.) permeates wider decision-making in the sphere of consumption and leisure and that it requires specific social and material conditions. I shall then show that if modernism has now become hijacked to add to the dignity of the dominant class, Bourdieu’s understanding of its rise accounts for it differently, that is, in terms of modernist artists as a heroic group who preserved the autonomy of the artistic field from the laws of the market. The laws of this autonomous artistic field will then be explained, along with Bourdieu’s claims to have a method for the science of literature and art which is more effective than that of his rivals. A brief assessment of its hidden debts and its weaknesses concludes this chapter.

Art and the ideologies of natural gifts

Throughout all his cultural works Bourdieu aims to unveil the mystification caused by ideological distortion. Three linked ideologies have been the object of his recurrent dissection: the ideology of the fresh eye, the ideology of the charismatic artist and the ideology of natural taste. In terms of classic Ideologiekritik, he shows that these three attitudes systematically favour the dominant class. Thus there is an equivalence between Bourdieu’s approach and Marx’s method in Capital, which also aims to show that economic ideology contains religious or magical vestiges. Bourdieu’s method is to use Marx’s critique in another sphere of production in the bourgeois period, that of cultural goods. The prevalent approach to cultural production is represented by an essentially religious attitude to the operation of a mystery. Cultural production is therefore defined as the expression of transcendent genius, and is elevated both beyond the human and beyond analysis. Yet cultural reception is also naturalised, so that it appears the consequence of innate distinction. It follows especially from the first that Bourdieu’s
demand for a return to the social relations underlying culture means that there is no ‘essence’ of a text, that is, no single set of interpretative rules which dictate the terms under which a text unambiguously yields up its treasures. Perhaps it is not surprising that it was also Marx who said – à propos censorship – ‘Who are to be the authorised producers? And who are to be the authorised readers?’ (cited in Prawer, 1976: 47). The punishment of death is no longer used to induce compliance to the range of canonical books protected by papal imprimatur, but it is Bourdieu’s view that secular canons of consecrated culture still serve authority, even at the cost of symbolic violence.¹

Bourdieu draws on descriptions of novels or poems as abstracted or fetishised commodities, in other words, as products that are sold on the market and viewed as things, independent of the specific social relations of production underpinning them. Just as Marx showed how the ideology of classical economics, with its Holy Family of land, labour and capital, depended on a magical manipulation of categories, so Bourdieu shows that a similar magic is at work in doxic discussions of the objects of cultural consecration:

Consequently ... a rigorous science of art must, pace both unbelievers and iconoclasts and also the believers, assert the possibility and necessity of understanding the work in its reality as a fetish; it has to take into account everything which helps to constitute the work as such, not least the discourses of direct or disguised consecration which are among the social conditions of the work of art qua object of belief. (1993a: 35)

Bourdieu presents the aristocrats of culture as ‘justified’ men, who are, in this respect, the heirs to the arrogant self-made men of the early industrial bourgeoisie. Indeed, even by characterising culture in terms of consumption, he desacralises objects which have become the focus of veneration. This is particularly marked in the case of the ‘high priests’, those professors of English who recoil from the crude language of ‘production and consumption’ for the hallowed objects of their studies. However, unlike the Nietzschean refutation of Christianity as a whole secret machinery of salvation erected on suffering (Nietzsche, 1961: 200), Bourdieu does not conclude that the objects of artistic awe are merely the product of mystification. Rather, the title of his work Les Règles de l’art (1992) (The Rules of Art (1996)), suggests that it is possible to redescribe art so as to valorise it without the distortions of individualism, perhaps rather as Durkheim (1995) thought religion might be revalued as an expression of the transcendence of the social over the individual. For the use-value of some works may be retained after their fetishistic aspect of literary creation has been stripped from them:

[O]ne might, by ... [a] willing suspension of disbelief, choose to ‘venerate’ the authorless trickery which places the fragile fetish beyond the reach of critical lucidity. (1993a: 73)
Thus his approach to literary analysis also provides the prerequisites for an adequate understanding of the ‘singular vision’ of Flaubert or the profundity of the symbolic revolution initiated by Manet.

But first, we need to understand the approach of *Distinction*. The method deployed most conspicuously in this work entails the scandalous transgression of critically esteemed categories, particularly the subversion of the boundary between sacred and profane. Where Kantian conceptions of high culture are premised on an undisputable boundary-line between the works of artistic genius and everyday products – signalled by the difference between the difficult and the facile – Bourdieu insists on the prevalence of such oppositions within modes of perception and appreciation in a wide variety of areas of living. For example, he links artistic consumption and production to that of food and insists on mapping tastes across these rigidly patrolled frontiers (1984: 13, 100). This irreverent viewpoint reveals that the adoption of a preference in each of the various parameters of cooking – sweet/sour, pungent/bland, crude/delicate, etc. – is also the template of choice in the area of mainstream aesthetics. Tastes might be systematically elaborated in the areas considered ‘high’ because they are more abstract or pure, such as for some types of music, but they are still subject to the same oppositions that prevail in the arena of more *sensuous* pleasure. The main source of these tastes or needs is the habitus, a set of attitudes engrained in agents so early that they acquire an unconscious compulsive force. As one such instance, Bourdieu reports that working-class men dislike fish because it conflicts with the rules of vigorous masculinity, the bones necessitating a more delicate operation than the hearty mouthfuls felt to be proper for a manly man (1984: 190). In this case, bourgeois men occupy the opposite ‘feminine’ pole, opting for delicate cultivation rather than earthy directness. In other areas, such differentiations revolve less around taste for an object or indifference to it, than around how it is used. The enjoyment of inventive form rather than the celebration of the family in photographs;² the preference for a Romantic landscape combining the wild with the cultivated rather than the more formal aesthetic with its rigid segregation; visits to galleries to see artists other than those celebrated in contemporary trends: all these are interconnected choices springing from the initial acquisition of a cultural ethos (1991: 57). In this context, the preference for imaginative disorder rather than repressive order marks an aesthetic opposition which Bourdieu notes as rooted in the unconscious. It indicates a fundamental division between the secure and relaxed stance of the ‘old rich’ and the rigid self-discipline of the petty bourgeoisie (1974: 20–1).

The same principles of perception, cognition and appreciation inform all areas of cultural choice, both in the scholastic culture of duty and obligation and in the ‘free’ culture of leisure. Moreover, in opposition to Kant, Bourdieu claims that such choices are not merely cerebral but are, literally, embodied. Even music – Kant’s highest and most intellectual art – moves us, seizes us in the stomach (‘ravishes’ us), while we may also be ‘nauseated’ by a wallpaper or interior colour scheme.
The habitus, from which such conscious and unconscious ordering devices derive, can be summarised in the dichotomy between the 'aesthetic gaze' and the 'naive gaze'. This distinction takes various guises, not just in relation to general differentiations of consumption according to class and in the opposition between professional painter and untaught painter in the field of art (1992: 349). The aesthetic gaze prioritises style or the mode of representation. It is concerned not with registering or morally evaluating the nature of the empirical world but with a self-sufficient form of play, concerned therefore with the way images are deployed or narratives are constructed. Linked analytically to Kant’s ‘judgement of beauty’, the aesthetic gaze is part of a game of form from which certain people are excluded:

It is barbarism to ask what culture is for; to allow the hypothesis that culture might be devoid of intrinsic interest, and that interest in culture is not a natural property – unequally distributed, as if to separate the barbarians from the elect – but a simple social artifact, a particular form of fetishism; to raise the question of the interest of activities which are called disinterested because they offer no intrinsic interest (no palpable pleasure, for example ), and so to introduce the question of the interest of disinterestedness. . . . [T]here is practically no question of art and culture which leads to the genuine objectification of the cultural game, so strongly are the dominated classes and their spokesmen imbued with a sense of their cultural unworthiness. (1984: 250–1)

Those possessing a naive gaze – like Rousseau in Kant’s account – refuse to evaluate the beauty of a great house independently of their moral disapproval of it as a site of exploitation. They enjoy the artistic celebration of commonplace enjoyments, such as sunsets or a mother and her child. The status groups that can manipulate a rare as opposed to a common or shared cultural heritage derive symbolic profits from this. For Bourdieu the same overarching polarisation is at stake, for in the formalism of the aesthetic gaze is demonstrated also a concern for individuation or differentiation, whereas in the naive regard there is an expression of what the group shares in common. ‘Barbarism’ therefore embodies the collective consciousness of the social group, or rather of those classes in which the collective consciousness is most unadulterated by the social forces for distinction.

The habitus of the aesthetic gaze is engendered by the distance from material necessity. Like all pure gazes, it is observation which has acquired dignity from being detached from participation and action. It is the object, moreover, of time and rigour (1984: 183). Here again we see Bourdieu developing a perspective which owes much to Marx. If Marx had a labour theory of value, in which the value of a commodity was based on the amount of labour-time used in its production, the consumption of symbolic goods can also be measured by the time and rigour necessary to master them (1984: 350). The heart of the aesthetic is the long mastery of old texts. For it is only through this lengthy education that there can be an appreciative awareness of the power to startle which is possessed by the really new. Thus the aesthetic gaze which is fascinated with the signifier, as in the Surrealist and Dadaist avant-gardes, has as its prerequisite the saturation in earlier forms of art. It
follows that the twentieth-century avant-garde concern for intertextuality, with its nostalgia, pastiche and melancholy, is merely the ideal type of the aesthetic gaze. Since the aesthetic gaze is the product of the closeness to old things, such as inherited paintings and furniture, it is the attribute of the haute bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Paradoxically, despite the iron cage of instrumental rationality constructed by a bourgeois world, a gentrified status ethic reigns in the arena of taste.

A further principle is counterposed to the time perspective fundamental to the aesthetic attitude (and epitomised in the Proustian 'waste of time'). This is the perspective of space. A spatial axis that differentiates the culture of distinction from the more traditional solidaristic cultures is demarcated by the separation of the industrial from the peripheral arenas of the world-market, favouring particularly the metropolis (1984: 250). The Parisian haute bourgeoisie is also contrasted with its class equivalents in regions such as Lille, who possess predilections closer to the pole of 'bourgeois art' (timeless, therefore déclassé works celebrating social harmony) or middle-brow, petty-bourgeois taste (a pleasure in the older classics and in 'pre-digested' forms of culture).

One further point here. To the mental classifications such as sweet–sour, coarse–fine, banal–refined, there is a a linked group of categories setting the dominant class apart from the dominated (high–low, noble–common, etc.). It is these distinguished expressions of noble feeling which are associated with the serious pleasure offered to the aesthetic gaze, while the simple sensuous charms of popular entertainment are linked to the naive gaze. Popular culture, in contrast, derives its force partially from the transgressive laughter of the carnival, (especially from the iconoclasm of the grotesque body (Bakhtin, 1968)), and partially from an anti-aesthetic aesthetics, based on the absolute supremacy of the moral and political in plebeian criticism (Proudhon) (1984: 491). What is it that engenders with such stability both the historical ethos expressed in the aesthetic attitude and the popular culture of the naive gaze? Only a specific time–space axis which is rooted in material existence or lived experiences could acquire such power. Its origin is to be discovered in the possession or absence of a future which is conferred in turn by wealth (more precisely, access to surplus-value) and especially by the sense of possessing rare skills:

This is the difference between the legitimate culture of class societies, a product of domination predisposed to express or legitimate domination, and the culture of little-differentiated or undifferentiated societies in which access to the means of appropriation of the cultural heritage is fairly equally distributed, so that the culture is fairly equally mastered by all members of the group and cannot function as cultural capital. . . . (1984: 228)

Among sociologists profoundly influenced by Marx, Bourdieu is unusual in his anthropological inheritance, which leads him to emphasise the importance of socialisation into cultures from a very early age. There are two sites of the aesthetic habitus: domestic transmission and scholarly culture. The earliest tastes are formed through the family and take on an
emotional bodily resonance which is ineradicable: works like Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier* are indissolubly linked with emotions of secure happiness when introduced to the child from early infancy through the ‘musical mother’ of bourgeois autobiography (1984: 75). Thus the route-map through which to decipher the confusing landscape of inherited music and art is early and effortlessly imparted to the bourgeois child. The school, in transmitting this canonised culture, organises it within a specific pedagogy. Where this curriculum is rational, it democratises the inherited culture; where a rational pedagogy is absent, it diffuses the culture to a select few, thus reproducing the social structure. Bourdieu’s point about contemporary France is that there is an invisible curriculum, underlying the scholarly curriculum, which ‘fills in’ the school-imparted knowledge and which is generally available only to the offspring of the dominant class. The children from the subordinate classes who surmount the obstacles of the lycée selection and subsequent examinations become, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘miraculous survivors’.

I have discussed so far the major division within consumption: between the sacred of the pure aesthetic gaze and the profane of the popular gaze. There are also subordinate disputes at stake in cultural struggles. Within the aesthetic attitude, there is the division between the gentlemanly or aristocratic ethos, originating at the court, and the more scholarly culture of the liberal professions. This is an antagonism of seminal significance in Bourdieu’s cultural theory. In a move he himself labels ‘vulgar’, he notes the homology between the structure of Kantian aesthetics (which valorises the complex analytical play of the mind as against the appeal of the senses) and the world-view of the dominated fraction of the dominant class, to which, as a professor, Kant belonged, and which preserved its distinctive virtue from its rigorous opposition to the worldly ease of the aristocracy. This becomes pivotal in Bourdieu’s later work, for artistic production itself is linked to the subaltern fraction of the dominant class, deracinated by primogeniture from the possession of temporal power. The dissident culture of the youthful haute bourgeoisie, rich in cultural capital, but lacking economic capital, is a recurrent subject. At the heart of his view of modern France, therefore, there is a series of potent contradictions or conflicts. Of these, the division between the *noblesse d’état* – drawn most often from the aristocracy of culture – and the entrepreneurial fractions of the dominant class is especially fateful. For the cultural critique of capitalism often gains its force from those who articulate an organicist and hierarchical alternative or who express an élite’s pessimistic disenchantment. It is these antagonisms which are played out in the struggles between the consecrated and the new avant-garde, as well as between the Left and the Right, which are represented in the mild parodies or drawing-room comedies of the Right Bank as against the social criticism of Left Bank intellectuals:

Whereas the dominant fractions of the dominant class (the ‘bourgeoisie’) demand of art a high degree of denial of the social world and incline towards a hedonistic aesthetic of ease and facility, the dominated fractions (the ‘intellectuals’ and
‘artists’) have affinities with the ascetic aspects of aesthetics and are inclined to support all artistic revolutions conducted in the name of purity and purification . . . . (1984: 176)

The transgressive modern intellectual is to be described later as the equivalent of the Renaissance fool. The licensed inversion of the authoritative claims of the dominant class is at once the source and limitation of such intellectuals’ radicalism.

Bourdieu’s notion of cultural goodwill, or the affirmative attitude towards legitimate culture, also plays a major part in his analysis, especially in relation to the middlebrow consumption of the old petty bourgeoisie. It is conditioned by his conception of time, for it is especially time that controls the upward trajectory of the socially mobile office-worker in the form of a ‘lost present’:

In the end these altruistic misers who had squandered everything on the alter ego they had hoped to be . . . are left with nothing but resentment — the resentment that always haunts them in terms of being taken for a ride by the social world which asks so much of them. (1984: 353)

Perhaps the most well known is Bourdieu’s work on the new petty bourgeoisie: educational failures from the dominant class who use their dominant taste to become the ‘need merchants’ of the new market for cultural and symbolic goods. This group – psychiatric professionals, aromatherapists, social workers, etc. – possess a ‘fun ethic’ and a taste distinguished by its Catholic expansiveness. Bourdieu is especially perceptive in noting the iconoclastic aspects of this world-view, which permits an eclectic alternation between the more creative and modernist elements of popular culture and the more accessible legitimate culture. In this mix, the body also becomes the site of a worldly discipline, depicted in language reminiscent of the Nietzschean critique of the sick moralism of earlier bourgeois culture.

Despite the many misplaced attempts to classify Bourdieu as an advocate of postmodernism, it is odd that nobody has yet pointed out how he has creatively reworked Durkheim, especially in his studies of the ideology of the culture of capitalist modernity. Durkheim’s *The Division of Labour* is in part concerned with the decline of sumptuary laws, that is, the regulation of dress, food and other codes for specific occasions and social estates (consequently, the nobility alone might wear ermine or gold; items for feasts and fasts may not be eaten everyday, etc.). Bourdieu emphasises that the ‘statutory signs of distinction’ in matters of cultural goods were abolished in the nineteenth century with the increased writing for the market done by the de Kocks, Feuilllets and others (1971: 1359). However, he stresses that consumption today is still informally structured despite the removal of all fetters or ‘Chinese walls’ against the free movement of commodities (Marx, n.d.: 53). For consumption is controlled by the habitus. Within such dispositions, differentiated by gender and class, are laid down the pleasures which later lead the actor to occupy a specific position. As Bourdieu explains, this is largely an unconscious process. The typical child from the dominated class experiences through the habitus both the exclusion from the
dominant class and, more surprisingly, the willed acceptance of his/her subordinate position through visceral repulsion from the style of life of the bourgeoisie (1984: 169–75). Taste is the principle through which individuals occupy a certain social space:

It continuously transforms necessities into strategies, constraints into preferences, and without any mechanical determination, it generates the set of ‘choices’ constituting life-styles. . . . (1984: 175)

In other words, when supernatural and moral sanctions lose their power, it is through taste, style and even pleasure that we come to accept certain occupations and kin positions. The habitus creates an active willed choice to occupy certain spaces, even if behind this choice there is also necessity. My argument, then, is that Bourdieu has taken Durkheim’s ‘sumptuary freedom’ and replaced it with his notion of ‘free culture’ or ‘domestic culture’. In an enterprise of demystification not unlike that provoking the fin-de-stîcle angst of Durkheim, Bourdieu emphasises the bizarre conjuncture of social forces such that academic work based on the pleasures of luxury is converted into the educational laurels implicit in categorisation of ‘brilliance’, ‘refinement’ and ‘originality’. Such educational classifications euphemise and disguise the underlying social classification (1988a: 218). But the more menacing dimensions of these individuated social processes are never very remote. Distinction might emphasise the ‘Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie’, like Buñuel, but symbolic violence and the reproduction of inequality are never far beneath the surface. They are thrown into relief by the ceaseless struggle of self-exploitation and self-limitation on the part of the petty bourgeoisie. And even many children of the haute bourgeoisie in the university, who possess all the signs of grace, are nevertheless plagued with doubts comparable to those of Calvinists in their counting-houses as to whether they have acquired salvation (see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964: 74).

As the synthesis of all Bourdieu’s earlier writing, Distinction provides the most sustained analysis of artistic and non-artistic culture. It offers an extraordinary depiction of the ethos of cultural consumption of groups differentiated in space and time, and, beyond these, in their relation to the material urgencies of life. The book cuts between a Proustian perspective on the part of the aristocrats of culture and a Proudhonian aesthetic on the part of the skilled working class, in a dizzying exercise of perspectival thought that has the scope of a modernist novelist like Musil.

The liberation of art

Parallel to the analysis of authorship by Barthes and Foucault, Bourdieu proposes a sociological account of artistic genius. The artist represents, for him, the prophet in a theodicy of bad fortune. He/she is thus the descendant of the Old Testament prophets who upbraided the Ancient Jewish tribes for neglecting the moral law. Prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, spoke of the
social group as a totality, through their concern with its inner life. Transformed in modernity by the break with tradition, artists have become similar austere voices of doom and visionaries of the social order.

The Jews possessed a ‘special contract’ as a chosen people, with a God who is nevertheless a universal God. As Max Weber pointed out, what came to distinguish the Jewish pastoral people was their highly unusual interpretation of their history. He categorised this as a theodicy of bad fortune. For the more the Jewish people seemed neglected by their God and subjected to a whole array of catastrophic miseries, the more they believed that they alone were saved. It is this conception of the value of suffering for salvation that Bourdieu calls on in his conception of the bohemian artist. The real writer establishes his reputation only through risking rejection and experiencing suffering. Thus the invention of the bohemian artist derives from their need to project onto the beyond of posterity a solution to the present time-lag between artists’ ‘supply’ and the consumers’ ‘demand’ (1971: 1359).

From salon to bohemia (France, 1850s)

In the aftermath of Louis Napoleon’s seizure of power, an autonomous art-world emerged. More precisely, the art-world splits: on the one hand into the market for restricted production and on the other into the market for large-scale production, the commercial organisation of the ‘culture industry’. Within the restricted field there is in turn an opposition between the bourgeois art of the official artists in the salons and the avant-garde art of ‘bohemia’. For bohemia can be considered a ‘reversed world’ or a ‘society within a society’ (1992: 86), founded on a fundamental rupture with the ethos of the market and the dominant class. The bohemian principles of erotic and alcoholic excess, love and opium create a culture of transgression, further sustained by songs, linguistic puns and jokes (1992: 88). The artistic habitus most characteristic of modernity is shaped by knowledge of this oppositional history and the lived experience of heterodoxy. Balzac had divided the world into three orders: he who works, he who does nothing and he who contemplates a masterpiece. The bohemian does nothing (1992: 87).

What then determined this ‘empire within an empire’ (1992: 90)? Briefly, profits and persecution. Bohemia emerges within an economic boom of ‘profits without precedent’, with the rise of the Talabots, Wengels and Schneiders and the accelerated entry of domestic workers into factories (1992: 77). While Bourdieu retains the notion of fetishism to describe this aggressively capitalist turn, he also sees proletarianisation and bohemianisation as twin processes, organically tied to increased market freedom, with bohemia as a protective sanctuary against the fate of free labour. Its occupants inherited their insouciance from the remaining artisan cultures of wandering ‘masterless men’: magicians, clowns, jugglers, singers. But the Bonapartist regime after 1850, as a dictatorial state, was itself founded on
the suspension of parliament and union activity: it exerted a rigid censorship with the imprisonment of political dissidents, amongst whom artists were included. Both Flaubert’s and Baudelaire’s works were the subject of trials. From such repression was born the ‘heroic period’ of bohemia (1992: 76)

Bohemia was ‘the world turned upside down’ of the haute bourgeoisie in particular, for it was opposed both to the salon and to the Academy. It thus has some parallels with the subversive rituals of carnival, although carnival was a popular holiday from the noble principles of vision (and division), whilst bohemia was a movement of internal exiles, initially from both dominant and dominated classes. Unlike the best-selling artists of contemporary novel factories, bohemian artists despised economic rewards.6

Bourdieu insists that bohemian artists and writers have to be understood also against the backcloth of the changes in the artistic field itself, not least the increase in the number of artists and their concentration within Paris. This itself was a response to the new compulsory education, producing new mass publics. Such a heterogeneous development in the number of producers with interests in the field created internal structural reasons for the new division of the artistic world. This recapitulated in many ways the earlier sectarian critique of social forces hospitable to dominant material interests. Nor was the analogy with the sect lost on contemporaries. Stendhal was to comment: ‘I am a sectarian’ (1993a: 122). Bourdieu borrows here from the views of Weber, stressing the utility of his theories of charismatic leaders and prophets for approaches to the cultural field, but it is noteworthy that he does so in different terms to Weber. Despite Weber’s stress on the continuities between art and religion, his theory of religious interests treats the emergence of charismatic prophets as though they are entirely independent individuals. For Bourdieu, more convincingly, if the Weberian trinity of priests, prophets and lay professionals is to be deployed in the cultural field, it must be without the assumption that these figures are structurally undetermined and therefore explicable only in terms of personality, leadership qualities, etc. (1987b). Specific social preconditions are necessary for the emergence of secular artists as bohemian figures, while the charismatic bohemians in turn legitimate their arts with the knowledge that it is the needs of the masses of which they alone speak.

The changes cited above in the wider power relations and their impact on cultural production explain the genesis of a formally autonomous field. Its subsequent development is by means of disruptions in the field, which can be viewed as symbolic revolutions or transformations which have the long-term effect of the ‘purification’ or aestheticisation of literature and art. This can be characterised as a movement from the initial Romantic bohemia of the 1830s, to the second ‘Realist’ bohemia, constituted largely by plebeian intellectuals (1840s onwards). This is then followed by the bohemia of the 1850s and 1860s, drawn from the dominated fraction of the dominant class, which was to reject ‘realism’ and to turn instead towards style (1992: 110–11, 118). It is this moment of the conquest of artistic ‘autonomy’ which particularly interests Bourdieu, characterised as it is by a dual change, the
Initial appearance of a set of relations which change the artistic habitus, pushing the writer towards a more allusive text, for example, and also the shadowed ideological expression of this in the charismatic view of the poet or painter (1992: 92).

The trajectory of each individual artist – Gautier, Baudelaire or Flaubert – he links not merely to their class origins, or, as Sartre does, to their position in the family and in the family romance. In order to make the trajectory of each artist totally explicable it is also necessary to depict the artist’s action within the autonomous art-world. Such strategies take as their backdrop the 1850s ‘invention of the life of the artist’, that is, the artist’s disinterestedness, the Christ-like suffering that is the proof of extraordinary vision and the dialectic of distinction (or the logic of perpetual surpassment). Thus the unmasking of artistic ideologies means that the highly spiritual self-presentation of the artist must be coolly scrutinised in the light of his/her artistic interests, as well as the characteristics of the field of power. Within the new artistic field, the artist with cultural capital, and especially with knowledge of the collective inheritance of art, is alone capable of becoming a powerful player. Unresourced by rent and undercapitalised with education, rural plebeian intellectuals are only eclipsed by the brilliant circuits of their more favourably placed rivals. The fate of the plebeians was typically to retreat from the metropolis and to seek refuge outside it, as the writers of regional novels etc. It is for these reasons that the bohemia of autonomous art is based on a ‘double rupture’ (1992: 115), a simultaneous recoil both from bourgeois culture and from popular culture. Bourdieu thus clarifies with this second bohemia the exact dimensions of the trend towards artistic formalism.

The Realist bohemia then represents a parallel to the 1848 political movements within the artistic field. The social art of Champfleury, Bonvin, Courbet, Duranty, Castagniari and Desnoyers is captured in the ‘bohème dorée,’ so christened by Henri Murger, which was the home both of deracinated bourgeois groups and of stigmatised minorities. Baudelaire is an active figure of revolution within this circle; Flaubert a more peripheral presence. This was a circle dominated by artists of artisan or poor petty-bourgeois orgins (1992: 134). Being thus absolutely constrained by time and money, they had no opportunity to accumulate in leisurely manner the capital in terms of a knowledge of art history which is one mark of the artistic habitus.

This moment of creative realism, which leaves its great remains in Courbet’s reworkings of popular woodcuts and in Baudelaire’s visions of metropolitan fragmentation and abandonment, is a transitional phase only. To it is owed Baudelaire’s negative image of the future as the ‘puerile utopia of art for art’s sake’ (1992: 89). The pure art which superseded it has to be understood as both rejecting the alliance with the people of the ‘Realist’ bohemia but at the same time as rejecting extreme formalism, in which the exposing ethical gaze of the artist is silenced by means of an exclusive focus on the means of representation alone.
There is a tension between the two presentations of the proletarianised intelligentsia in this account of bohemia. On the one hand there is a continuing structural conflict between the recruits from the dominant class and those from the subaltern classes within the bohemian space. On the other hand these antagonisms can be periodised. Thus the 1848 February Revolution represented a temporary recapitulation of the 1830 Revolution, with the bourgeoisie ranged against the finance aristocracy in an alliance with the people. It was the moment also for the proletarianised intellectuals and realism (1992: 40).

The ‘double rupture’ – with both the dominant class and the people – is the generating principle of Flaubert and Baudelaire’s art after 1850. It ushers in the aesthetic of modernity, a pure art which repudiates both engagement and false idealism. In my view, the originality of Bourdieu lies in his description of this pure art and its recuperated fate in a way which seeks to transcend the false dichotomy within Marxist aesthetics between the epistemological naivety of Lukácsian realism and the modernism of Adorno. Bourdieu’s theory of artistic capital, productive freedom and the long time-span for disinterested success claims that in the restricted field the artists who have acquired reputations have been those who derive from the dominated fraction of the dominant class, and not from the subordinate class. Consequently, this has entailed the perpetually ‘fragile alliance of artists and people’ (1994a: 146). In this alliance, success in terms of the ‘dialectic of distinction’ constantly removes the painter or writer from the mass base he or she aims at. The typical fate of artists is that they progressively reinterpret their concerns in terms of ‘how it is said’ rather than ‘what is said’, that is, they are increasingly concerned with the distinctiveness of their means of representation (1992: 197).

Bourdieu’s major emphasis is thus on the ‘contradictory class location’ of the artist, a space which is simultaneously dominated and dominant. This site engenders a sense of marginality which leads artists to develop their analytical potential in an artistic way of seeing and to perfect new techniques as artistic means of production. At the same time their location threatens constantly to reduce their accountability to the widest public and to narrow their world-vision to that of the cultivated members of the ruling class, due to the structural limitation imposed by the field of restricted production. This tragic vision of art is sufficiently flexible to permit not only the celebration of an individual modernist like Flaubert, but also an unambiguous description of the perspective to which the viewpoint of pure art corresponds.

The bohemia of pure art has not discarded what has gone before:

But [Baudelaire] never renounces what he has acquired by his passage through the most dispossessed regions of the literary world, which are thus the regions most favourable to a critical and global perception – disenchanted and complex, criss-crossed by contradictions and paradoxes – of this world itself and the whole social order. Moral deprivation and misery, even while they constantly threaten his mental integrity, appear to him as the only possible site for freedom and the only legitimate principle of an inspiration inseparable from an insurrection. (1996: 60)
Hence Baudelaire’s integrity was sustained through this opposition to the world of power despite the dandyism and blasphemies which separated him from the respectable working class. His suspicion of the people is an endemic feature of the ‘elect élitism’ of the second bohemia.

Flaubert’s goal of extending the scope of the novel led him to distance himself simultaneously from best-selling fiction, which won its acclaim by flattering the public, and also from the classical gaze which insists on noble forms and noble subjects. Instead he wants ‘to write well about the mediocre’ (1992: 140) and to work on the level of form to make the real apparent (1992: 142). This ‘realist formalism’ requires a new intertextuality of the novel – a revalorisation of the great writers of the past whilst challenging the conventions of the former Academic monopoly.

This required the ‘institutionalisation of anomie’ or the de-regulated championing of the new in art: ‘[E]ach creator is authorised to introduce his own nomos, with works bearing – without antecedents – their own norms of perception’ (1992: 103; 1993a: 333). In reintroducing the term ‘anomie’ (the absence of rules) in connection with the second bohemia, Bourdieu again explicitly connects the artistic formations of modernity with Durkheim’s pioneering explorations. Further, his discussion of the division of the artistic field between restricted and large-scale production, which is the result of the increase in the numbers of cultural producers, also resembles Durkheim’s description of the increased density (of population) which brings about the organic division of labour. Durkheim is the brooding theoretical presence behind much of *Les Règles de l’art* from its title onwards, but Bourdieu draws on the ‘radical Durkheim’, who stresses the connection between social structures and mental classifications, not the structural functionalist Durkheim. Durkheim was himself aware of the exposed structural location of artists and writers, since it is these groups he explicitly links to suicidogenic currents.

More important, for Bourdieu, is Durkheim’s image of anomic modernity which takes – and inverts – contemporaries’ fears of the mob or crowd. For Durkheim, social development is inextricably tied to the twin phenomena of the lonely figure who rejects tradition and demands the pursuit of new paths, and the supportive crowd, whose collective effervescence suspends normal categories and legitimates the new (1995).

Bourdieu extends the idea of an artistic new nomos through his studies of Flaubert and Baudelaire, the Symbolists, Marcel Duchamp, etc. The bohemians have a collective identification with a ‘niche of madness’, in which there is a reversal of the economic world (1992: 141). Their works have a transgressive force. They obtain the pure pleasure of breaking the rules, but also – like the fool – they lay bare illusions, and in this lies their value.

Thus, taking *L’Éducation sentimentale*, Bourdieu moves from an orthodox reading which stresses the author’s position as a novelist of disillusionment to a reading of the text as a more serious ‘model of social aging’ (1992: 61). On this account, Frederick, in his pilgrimage through Paris and Le Nogent seeking to find love, creativity, friendship and material sufficiency, is
doomed to discover only their monstrous incompatibility. *L’Éducation sentimentale* is, for Bourdieu, the presentation within a literary text of a sociologically realist model of social life.

Frederick himself expresses the social divisions of modernity. For Mme Arnoux he feels an uplifting love which can never become sensual. For Mme Dambreuse, the wife of a powerful banker, he feels a mesmeric attraction which can never be resurrected once she becomes a destitute widow. For Rosanette — the courtesan and his social and educational opposite — he experiences a sexual passion which can never be resolved other than through madness. Politically, his actions are equivalently self-cancelling. Like many bourgeois, he turns to the Revolution at the outset of 1848, but his role is one of passive support, not active engagement on the barricades. He distances himself from the stupidity of proceedings in the radical political clubs and casts his die with the Dambreuse banking circle, only to become disgusted by their imprisonment of their enemies and their use of money to buy political advantage. *L’Éducation sentimentale* is therefore the literary unmasking of the real nature of Louis Napoleon’s farce and Frederick is, for Bourdieu, emblematic of the unheroic nature of the political opposition to the Emperor’s Eighteenth Brumaire.

For Bourdieu, then, *L’Éducation sentimentale* cannot be read, as Lukács suggests, as a novel, which, by interiorising events rather than by expressing them through objective action, fails to reach the triumphs of the earlier critical realism of Stendhal or Balzac. It is not simply that the artist has now become a passive observer rather than an active force in history, as Lukács suggests in *Studies in European Realism* (1978). Rather, for Bourdieu, the bohemian novelist is a realist, although the term itself has become a stake in the struggles over the aesthetic arena. What Flaubert reveals through the image of Frederick’s hesitations and his clashing avowals to different social worlds is not so much the weakness of this personality but rather the fragmentation of the social order. Within the highly structured fields of power of modernity, Flaubert depicts a world in which only tragic individual distortion or exploitation is possible. In an allusion to Weber, Bourdieu suggests that Flaubert also lays bare the mutual incompatibility of salvation through erotic sensitivity, artistic creativity or business success. Within these social worlds – polarised in terms of their possession of temporal or spiritual power – Frederick is the image of a homeless wanderer who cannot choose between such values. Even the artist himself becomes a monstrosity ‘above all of humanity’ (1992: 151). Pure art is like pure love: both are disembodied and hence opposed to life and to practical necessities; both are sterile perversions (1993a: 157).

In representing Frederick as a type like himself, Flaubert neither simply reflects his social world nor merely depicts his own hesitations. Going beyond these unhappy alternatives, he offers a sociological view of things, though one concealed by literary form. Sociology lays bare what fiction creates in veiled form. In this respect, *fiction subdues the terror of the present*. Flaubert said, ‘I will have done true writing, which is rare’ (1992:...
Like the adolescent, the writer denies reality by constructing an imaginary world. But through this fiction two purposes are served at a stroke. First the writer reveals the complex structures of the field of power. Secondly — and here Bourdieu recalls Adorno — artistic practice opens up the possibility of anticipating alternatives, precisely because literary form depends on the imaginary universe of illusion.

This literature is ‘the reconciliation of the irreconcilable’ in the dominant representation of art (1992: 115) in the sense that it possesses not only an affinity with art for art’s sake but also a deeper social or ethical commitment, going beyond the conventional expressions of the ethical in ‘social art’. In his disenchantment, Frederick’s aphorisms such as ‘fraternity is the great invention of social hypocrisy’ actually operate as an ethical penetration of the stale rhetorics through which Left careerism is concealed. Bourdieu sees in Flaubert an ‘art for art’s sake of transgression and revolt’. To this end, Flaubert destroys the pyramidal construction of the earlier novel form and disrupts the simplicity of perspective (1992: 164). For him and for subsequent modernists, a condition of penetrating to the essential relations, which exert the strongest causal force, is the abandonment of the simplicity of a single viewpoint. The consequent multiplicity of perspectives, the fragmentation of the personality and the notion of space as aggregated rather than unified, represent the decline of Enlightenment conceptions based on the Cartesian rational subject (1992: 163). 7

That text which in refusing to ‘make a pyramid’ and to ‘open up perspectives’ declares itself as a discourse of the here and now, and from which the author is effaced (though like Spinoza’s God he remains immanent and coextensive with his creation), there, then, is Flaubert’s point of view. (1996: 112)

I quote this passage because nothing clarifies more the degree of finality of the break with Lukács at this point. Bourdieu is not arguing that Flaubert’s art is a lesser form, as Lukács believed, psychologically enriched but, in relation to the critical realists, socially reduced. He certainly accepts Lukács’ view that Flaubert’s novels represent the product of contemplation rather than an active sense of being in the world, while he shares his conclusions about the artist’s loss of popular appeal, but this does not represent for him a loss of artistic scope. Thus Bourdieu uses Lukács’ own criterion for literature — that it should understand the essential relational connections of modern society — as a critique of the narrowness of Lukács’ own literary canon, just as in the 1930s Brecht had turned Lukács’ critique of modernist formalism into a critique of Lukácsian formalism.

Bohemia and social origins

Flaubert is typical of bohemians of the modernist second period in being the son of a member of the liberal professions. His father, a surgeon, encouraged his son’s protracted education, supporting his travels in Egypt and the Middle East. In hinting at an anti-bourgeois family world-view, Bourdieu
suggests that Flaubert's own antipathy to this politically dominant class had deeper roots than the writer's structural opposition to market and utilitarianism. He is a member of the dominated fraction of the dominant class, because he was temporarily impoverished in the 1848 period, an heir who had not yet inherited and who thus depended ignominiously on allowances from home. Yet, as Bourdieu quotes Zola, this merely meant that 'rent took the place of sales' (1992: 124). Distance from commercial writers and from the need to get a living by discovering the taste of the wider public was thus granted by the inner assurance of economic independence. Such freedoms could permit more artistic experiments and the accumulation of other elements of cultural capital. This point is crucial for Bourdieu's structural depiction of the bohemian artist, the equivalent in the cultural field of the politician who lives 'for' politics rather than the politician who lives 'off' politics (Gerth and Mills, 1947: 85–6). The bohemian affiliation permits the fullest development of the artistic habitus, or the particular pattern of cognition and appreciation prevalent at the time. A precondition for this is mastery of the collective labour of the field, that is, the literary inheritance. It is only as a consequence of socialisation into the 'cultural mode of production', with its norms imposed constantly on each productive member, that significant productive advances are possible, in Bourdieu's account, and a new nomos can be created. This requires social time due to the slow process of acquisition of this collective labour and is only available to the children of the dominant class. Additionally, it requires a certain social place. Bourdieu insists that it is only on condition of deserting their country existence and coming to the city that the possibility for a creative contribution to modern art can occur.

Courbet and Champfleury are emblematic of the alternative possibilities, divergent from Flaubert or Baudelaire. Both became members of the first bohemia but their resulting social trajectories are profoundly different. Courbet represents the last great successful Realist painter, in Bourdieu's view. His reputation is made before Louis Napoleon's seizure of power and is thus connected to the progressive bourgeoisie's engagement with the 'social question'. Further, Courbet was able to be a larger-than-life rustic in Paris, a figure whose conviviality and common speech heightened the identification of the painter with the peasantry (1992: 366–7). However, his choice of Realism is explained not by his peasant origins, but by the opposition within the restricted field to the spiritual character of bourgeois art.8

In the case of Champfleury, on the other hand, although writing at a time when literature was still comprehensible to all those who were literate, it was impossible to compensate for distance from the metropolis. He attempted to develop the Realist novel as Courbet had Realist painting, but his lack of new writing led him only to take up with ponderous slowness positions which had been adopted quicker by others. Champfleury's failure to acquire recognition led him to accept, out of necessity, another strategy: that of becoming a regional or 'peasant' novelist. By becoming successful in this,
he became cut off from literature in the restricted field. Champfleury is the model for all lower-class writers who abandon their rural roots in the modernist period without being able to compete successfully in the city. It is also in this light that Bourdieu emphasises the passage of time which leads some members of the Parnassian Symbolist group to participate by turning to the production of psychological novels (1992: 176).

Given the prevailing field of power and their position within the time–space axis, it is the sons of the dominant class who are poised to take possession of the aesthetic field. It is these social origins which alone confer on the writer or artist the necessary resilience to become the ‘accursed’ figures of the poet or modern painter. If bohemia is, then, the enclosure of madness, there still persist within it inequalities in the chance of receiving recognition as charismatic. Only those who are buttressed by material supports can endure the perils of initiating a style which has not yet been ‘banalised’. It is only through the process of routinisation of the avant-garde, when the works literally become readable, that such artists acquire the fruits – or symbolic profits – of their iconoclastic action. So Bourdieu argues, using Duchamp’s image, that each avant-garde movement is like a double-barrelled shotgun: it is fired once at its start but then goes off again after a long period of social ageing (1992: 227). This dual reception depends on the social formation of an art-loving public, for they are the instrument through which the movement can be consecrated. It also depends on the fusion or interlocking of the art-world with the world of power, a process which in itself is the signal for a new avant-garde to surpass the old. Bourdieu’s distinctive use of the term ‘banalisation’ thus refers to the gathering ‘defamiliarisation’ of a ‘defamiliarising’ art-work (1992: 198–9).

Consecration, then, is not merely a process of the routinisation of a defamiliarising vision, it is the subjection of meaning to the authoritative interpretation of those with linguistic capital and other forms of temporal power. The analogy of avant-garde prophets depends partly on the dialectical movement of prophetic sects into churches, accommodated to the world. But there are also overtones in Bourdieu’s banalisation of ‘symbolic revolution’, of Weber’s poignantly dystopian reading of the necessary dilution of socialist practices after revolutions. The mass of hangers-on drawn into a movement once it looks like being on the winning side not only have material interests in the movement, they also possess a rhetoric that itself ‘banalises’ the genuinely defamiliarising content of the renovating original message. I shall draw attention to this issue later.

‘Permanent revolution’, or symbolic revolutions as a structural feature inherent in art itself, develops only after 1850 with the ‘institutionalisation of anomie’ (1993a: 52–3). Art now proceeds through a process of ‘purification’ which inevitably separates ‘pure art’ or ‘literature’ from those who possess only primary school education. Such revolutions in ‘ways of seeing’ require the same kind of dedicated labour as that of the professional scientist. Bourdieu insists that what is at stake in such a revolution is never negligible, for it affects the mode of perception of every actor, the liberty to
use the name ‘artist’, to police boundaries to exclude pretenders but also to impose their world-vision on everyone:

To define boundaries, defend them and control entries is to defend the established order in the field . . . the great upheavals arise from the eruption of newcomers, who, by the sole effect of their number and their social quality, import innovation. (1996: 225)

The logic of the artist’s position is structured by the delicate balance between originality and disinterestedness. For the artist complies with the social needs expressed in the terms ‘spiritual’ or ‘altruistic’, which have been displaced from everyday social production by the rationalisation of the capitalist economy. This draws artists towards ‘an alliance with the people’. Hence one of the glittering prizes in terms of reputation is an association of the author or the movement with popular art. For Bourdieu, such strategies obscure the question of who the real bearers of the movement are. Taking such claims at their face value risks identifying such art with popular culture, which is itself restricted to a naive gaze. For the possession of the artistic capital necessary to make a successful career in art also cuts off artists from the workers and political revolutionaries whom they had once championed. The real dilemma is whether to remain popular (that is, comprehensible) or whether to appear to abandon the initial public by going for a more difficult form. It is the nature of the cultural field itself – and also the relatively privileged social origins of bohemian artists – that leads them to associate true disinterestedness with rarity. They seek distinction, not solidarity. The quest for distinction is in part unconscious, for those artists coming from the old haute bourgeoisie already possess a ‘natural’ distinction. The art dictated by such concerns is incompatible with production for the masses. So consecration and banalisation of a movement generate a new wave.9

The pursuit of distinction is therefore created by a multiplicity of social mechanisms, being the consequence of occupying both the field of power and the social field of art. The act of taking a position in the restricted field of literary or artistic production exposes the writer to the logic of that game or illusio. Only the extraordinarily resilient individual can resist throughout a whole working life the judgement of the institution ‘art’ which bestows recognition of his/her works. In this sense, Bourdieu’s exploration of the art-world emphasises the penetration of the social into even the most apparently private and isolated of acts and reminds the reader of Durkheim on suicide or of Goffman on madness.

Deviant cases: Zola and Rousseau

If Bourdieu’s theory of modernism is to be plausible, it must account for cases of writers who were exceptional in gaining critical acclaim and a popular following. The only candidates for this are those who have emerged to prominence after the expansion of the reading public: Dickens and Balzac are thus inadmissible.
Zola’s reputation seems genuinely anomalous. How could he have acquired simultaneously enormous sales for his books, prominence in defining the life of the intellectual, and eventual literary recognition? The answer, in Bourdieu’s view, lies in the historical contradictions exposed in the Dreyfus Affair. For in the defence of the Jewish military officer condemned to death, it was Zola who redirected the attention of the authorities, with his celebrated manifesto _J’Accuse_. By such a courageous political intervention, Zola thus became transformed into a literary figure (1992: 185-9). His novels, which had attracted notoriety for their application of a scientific investigatory method to subjects that had been thought to be lacking in dignity, became suddenly recuperated for Literature. Moreover Bourdieu shows Zola’s initial adoption of the field of large-scale production as the chosen terrain for his activities to have been itself exceptional. It was because of the early death of his father and his consequent lack of an inheritance that Zola was forced to move into the more commercial popular genre of the novel in the first place. His marginality in this sector ultimately permitted his recuperation.

The consecration of the naive painter, such as Henri (Le Douanier) Rousseau, is also a special case. If there is a refusal of bourgeois and working-class taste and standards of excellence in modernism, how is the emergence of the naive painter to be understood, for there seems to have been a series of such painters (Alfred Wallis could be mentioned in the case of Britain, Grandma Moses for America, etc.)? The answer suggested by Bourdieu is that the naive became a part of a couplet in modernism. He/she was the plaything of a field dominated by the professional modernist artist (1992: 339). We can only really understand Rousseau if we grasp that the essential relations in which he was placed within the cultural field led him to become the counterpart of Marcel Duchamp, a figure in whom is crystallised the most pure form of the subversive strategies of the new oppositional avant-garde. Hence the playful ‘destruction’ of the _Mona Lisa_ and other venerated cultural icons and the insistence on the role of chance in the adoption of the signature ‘Mutt’, rather than the over-serious suggestion that this might be an allusion to a contemporary comic. Such mocking resistance to attributions suggests the freedom of the totally autonomous artist to defy the art institution. But Rousseau’s role becomes clearer too. For he also represents the polar opposite of the academic gaze (that is, of the perspectival space, chiaroscuro and classical subject): as do all the artists of ‘l’art brut’ (schizophrenics etc.). Whereas Rousseau represents a response close to the distance from the art-world of the amateur painter, Duchamp’s ‘readymades’ are founded on his astute feel for the needs of the art-world (including the demands for esoteric knowledge) which was conferred on him as a member of a family with generations of professional painters (‘Duchamp was in the field like a fish in water’ (1992: 343)). Rousseau, then, is the model for Bourdieu’s handling of popular art.

Bourdieu’s more recent work ‘The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic’ (1992 and 1993a; chap. 10) and ‘The Genesis of the Eye’ (in 1992)
has extended the analysis of the ‘ideology of the pure eye’ or the ‘aesthetic attitude’. What Bourdieu aims to show in these late works on culture is the essentialism and idealism of the dominant mode of reception. Against a static structuralism, he emphasises that the work can only be understood historically, arguing that this position does not entail a relativist aesthetic. Similarly, against the philosophically ‘interactionist’ aesthetics of Danto and Dickie, he argues that their correct emphasis on the autonomous power of gallery-owner and critic has also to be understood within specific objective conditions or historical limits.

Part of Bourdieu’s irony is displayed in noting that recent philosophical analyses of art have adopted a nominalist position, hijacked from sociological symbolic interactionism. This claims that art-works are simply those labelled as art by members of the art-institution who have been authorised to perform acts of recognition, in part by the tactic of setting such objects within the framing of a certain space. Thus Danto argues that it is the gallery recognition of Warhol’s Brillo Pads that permits his acrylics or silk-screens to become art. The explanation of the force of the art-world in being able to exert this impact on other agents Bourdieu derives from Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Where Durkheim had insisted against Kant that society creates the unconscious a priori, Bourdieu asks us to consider that history is the a priori. In other words, the aesthetic categories, considered as analytically separable from ethical meanings and empirical propositions, are conferred by the ‘social group’ or, owing to the absence of an academy in modernity, by specialised professionals, private gallery-owners or dealers, etc., who regulate canonicity or battles over value.

‘The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic’ is subtly arresting, however, because it shows that such autonomy is relatively recent and that it is constrained within certain limits by the world of power. Fifteenth-century Italian painting was organised around a mode of reception that was not yet premised on a purely disinterested taste. This is because art had not yet emerged as an institution, ‘rationalised’ around its one differentiating element, style. Consequently there is an extraordinary homology between the reception of the late medieval master-painter and that of popular art today.

It is paradoxical that art is less mystified when it has not yet become separated from supernatural religion, but this is Bourdieu’s claim. For it is the critical discourse of modernity that has guaranteed literary value (as opposed to market value) only by attributing total timelessness and total universality to genuine works of art. Such overblown claims have their parallel in the aura of the artist. Whereas the fifteenth-century artist had economic needs in preserving a traditional family life, the modern artist is credited with an ascetic spirituality, which is devoid of all material interests. Ghirlandaio was concerned with the regularity and adequacy of his payment. The artistic economy was not yet a tabooed sphere, potentially capable of challenging the disinterested presentation of the artist.
Medieval contracts between artist and public were divergent from the modern in that the iconographical interpretation of the work was dependent on signs that were very widely diffused, in sermons, fairs and dances – like modern comic strips. According to Bourdieu, differences in interpretation were possible, but they were grounded in the lexicon or iconology used within the religiously based collective consciousness of the group and were common to artist and public. In contrast the autonomous artist is one whose signs are legible only to the few. The resulting fragmentation of the collective consciousness is the cost of artists’ freedom in the choice of style and subject.

Bourdieu stresses the collective activity necessary to sustain the magical circle of belief in modern art: it is not just the role of artists but the rationales for their distinction created by museum curators, historians, teachers, etc., that are decisive. Critical discourses are sufficiently flexible and vague to accommodate extraordinary combinations of diverse and incompatible works. The concepts of art criticism have not been cleansed of their origin within a specific habitus.

Something strange has happened here. Artistic language has become part of an autonomous field of social relations premised on inclusion and exclusion, but it still retains the traces of its origins in a set of binary oppositions (heavy–light, brilliant–dull, original–conformist). These are – as we have seen – multivalent signs in relation to social class usage. They possess the appearance alone of neutrality. In reality it is the dominant social power which confers positive and negative connotations on these terms.

It is worth noting that Bourdieu aims to destroy essentialism without resorting to relativism. By locating a work within a particular period, its ‘necessary’ existence is revealed:

But historicising them means not only (as one may think) retrieving them by reading that they have meaning solely through reference to a determined state of the field of struggle; it also means restoring to them necessity by removing them from indeterminacy (which stems from a false eternalisation). . . . The historicising of forms of thought offers the only real chance, however small, of escaping from history. (1993a: 263-4)

This is a provocative passage. Bourdieu is claiming that only a historical sociology can release art-works from their imprisonment within the class coffin of an Institution ‘Art’, an institution dominated by aestheticism and by the monopolisation for the elect of spiritual aesthetic grace. The objective meaning of the text can then be revealed and the work put to other purposes and practical uses, placed differently within the social relations of domination (such as struggles over class, environment and gender), etc.

In other words, historical sociology permits the work to be removed from its pedestal, where it touches the ‘transcendent’ or becomes the vehicle for weak Romantic abstractions about ‘life’, ‘experience’, etc. Instead it is situated through its artistic ancestry and its author’s being in relation to time and space. This does not make writers or artists ‘mouthpieces of myths’ but
makes possible the sort of appreciative return of the text to its generative cultural and social circuits. Through these means art and literature become not the vehicles of self-referential formal games operating as claims to distinction, but ways of thinking and feeling concerned with interventions in the world of action. Thus although he gives no hint of how this might occur, Bourdieu reveals clearly that he is an advocate of a changed mode of reception.

Critical issues in relation to Bourdieu’s sociology of culture

There are three main areas that I wish to introduce in criticising Bourdieu’s cultural theory. First, I want to raise a dissenting issue about Bourdieu’s interpretation of Kant as a formalist. With some irony, Bourdieu labels his analysis of Kantian theory ‘a vulgar critique of pure critiques of judgement’ (1984: 485). He notes that for Kant art was the more pure the more it was segregated from an immediate or naive pleasure in certain categories of sense-data. In this sense it was a pleasure of a highly abstract and rationalist kind, premised on the denial of the senses and the privileging of intellectual capacities above all other modes of response. Bourdieu claims that such a separation of enjoyment from artistic pleasure could only be the consequence of a double repression, in which the self is distanced not only from the aristocracy but also from the people. Kant’s own aesthetic philosophy, he suggests, possesses an elective affinity with his habitus as a professor and, by virtue of this, with membership of an economically powerless fraction of the dominant order.

He thus takes issue with the Kantian view that a judgement such as ‘this is a good painting’ can be simultaneously subjective and universal, or valid for everyone. Bourdieu’s own field-work shows the enormous divergence of tastes and explains these in terms of the existence of different kinds of habitus. Why, then, did Kant want to insist on universalism? The argument that Bourdieu hints at is that the sense of the universal is itself derived from the peculiar power of the ‘sacred’. In other words, it results from the impact of the ‘conscience collective’ or the respect for the group. By foregrounding the empirical discovery of clashes of taste, and the lower-class perception of their cultural inferiority, Bourdieu highlights his own powerful use of Durkheim’s conscience collective or the false universalism of the aesthetic ideology.

This argument is one he returns to in a number of studies (1984, 1990c). I think it would be wrong to read Bourdieu as a postmodernist proposing a nihilist critique of the Enlightenment subject. Yet it is clear from his own evidence in Photography (1990c) that Kant’s universal cannot simply be dissolved into the sublimated expression of individual self-interest. For example, Bourdieu shows that peasants and workers enjoy certain family portraits and photographs recording local celebrations. More relevantly, he states that they have a conditional aesthetic – a photograph of a dead soldier, for example, is not described simply as ‘beautiful’, that is, of universal
aesthetic importance. Rather, they stress ‘it could be used to show the horrors of war’ (1990c: 86). Thus peasants and workers are making a distinction between a purely personal photograph (which might reasonably have no artistic value for anyone else) and powerful shots of the dead which would jolt the observer into a recognition of the cost of war. We can conclude that when working-class people reject a Mondrian, this does indeed raise certain difficulties with modernist critics’ notion of a ‘universal’ aesthetic judgement which is held to exist as an analytical a priori – independent of any social codes or conventions. But Bourdieu’s own argument depends on elaborating further the subordinate class’s assumptions about a general interest, leaving us to conclude that his real target is not Kant but aestheticism and formalism. Against Bourdieu, it should be reiterated that the Kantian value of disinterestedness does not impose an aestheticist conception of art, since beauty as Kant conceives it does include ‘resistance to evil’ and the ‘sensuous representation of the ends of humanity’ (Kant, 1952: 77). There has been, of course, a twentieth-century purification of art and a consequent trend to the creation of a purely painterly ‘second reality’, but Kant could hardly be said to have anticipated this in his aesthetics. Bourdieu is certainly right to criticise Kant for his elitist exclusion of naive enjoyments of the pleasures of form, which were dismissed because of their dependence on additional ‘charm’ (sunsets etc.). However, despite some important assessments on the historical context of art, he has not proved the entire inconsistency of the Kantian problematic (see Crowther, 1994).

Secondly, Bourdieu has underestimated the unevenness of the trend to formalism in modernity. This argument will be developed more fully later. Here I want to suggest that there are particular difficulties with his division of culture into the field of large-scale commercial production and that of restricted production. I shall suggest that he has underestimated the capacity for work of artistic power to arise in the large-scale field. Bourdieu’s conception of popular art is particularly disparaging and I shall challenge this.

Thirdly, I want to question the oversimplified conception of artists and writers. It is argued that this group comes from the dominated fraction of the dominant class and possesses a common habitus with consumers from this class. As such, the artist’s drive to distinction invariably distances him or her from ‘the people’. I shall argue that in certain cases artists can remain ‘prophets’ even if they seek symbolic domination.

The whole of Bourdieu’s sociology is concerned with the emergence and explanation of the use of secular culture to buttress the ruling class as part of a conservative ideology. But the precise character of literature and art in this role is unclear. On the one hand, the formalism of the aesthetic gaze (the over-refined dandyism of technique, to use Arnold Bennett’s phrase) seems to be vested in the restricted field as an attribute of museum curators, critics, etc. – especially the more patrician of these (1991: 95–6; 1993a: 261). On the other hand, Bourdieu seems to hold that it is an attribute of artists, who emphasise the aesthetic gaze in order to win a reputation (1980a: 266). It is
this which is the artists’ Achilles’ heel, leading them in middle age to
distance themselves from the public whose interests they formerly took up in
order to satisfy their bourgeois customers.

There is in fact an unresolved tension in Bourdieu’s theory here. He has
two views of the artist. First, the artist is an austere and ascetic prophet-
figure, as in both the theory and practice of Baudelaire (1992: 88–103).
Secondly, given his dominant class habitus, the artist aims at a professional
reputation which will ensure him the potential to resume a relatively
privileged domestic life-style. This second view involves the artist playing a
double game. He is going for a bohemian, anti-capitalist strategy but is
hedging his bets by tailoring his painting etc. to the expressed wants of his
bourgeois customers or patrons. In this way, exchange-value is never
expelled from the bohemian Garden of Eden but slips in like a snake when
the artist is most off-guard.10

Which is his final emphasis? I think that Bourdieu has been pushed into
determinist and pessimistic conclusions. In these the texts are permanently
allied to a hegemonic project. But perhaps it is necessary to look more
closely at the specific contexts of reading and interpretative discussion (in
the broadest sense). At certain points, possibly within transient groups,
debate around texts tends to transform established structures rather than
reinforce a call to order, as numerous ex-soldiers have documented on the
role of Penguins in the Second World War. To rethink these issues is to pose
the sort of questions that were raised about the ‘Institution’ of Literature in
the 1960s and 1970s.

In this period, a number of writers – particularly on realism – argued that
canonised Literature could not be regarded as immune from ideology
(Bennett, 1981). For Eagleton, Baldick, Balibar and Macherey, and others,
the argument was not so much about the texts themselves but about the
relations into which they are put, some of which may serve to create
ideological effects. There is evidently an identity of views between these
arguments and those of Bourdieu above.

But Bourdieu is still unclear. We are left with a set of questions about
modernity. In what contexts might artists be able to operate as genuine
prophets even if they originate from the dominant class? Emphasis should be
placed on the texts, and not on the personal dispositions of the authors. This
is to restate the question raised by Benjamin, namely, at what historical
moments and in what structural forces will the author be pushed to an
aesthetics of politics as opposed to an aesthetic of style? It also raises the
sort of issue touched on by Raymond Williams as to the ‘anti-bourgeois
character of much bourgeois cultural production’ (1979: 155–6), and by
Edward Thompson as to the placing of texts (for example, Shakespeare, Mrs
Gaskell, Gillray, Cruikshank) within a popular radical tradition at certain
points (1968: 809–10). Finally, it raises absorbing questions about the
moments at which such anti-bourgeois artists are prepared to take the risks
and discomforts of becoming austere prophetic figures.
In this context, the role of exile and internal or external emigration among writers has been especially emphasised (Eagleton, 1976: 133–4). This seems to me to merit more thorough research, just as does Bourdieu’s similar but under-exploited category of ‘cross-trajectories’ (1989: 236). I might mention here the example of Rushdie as someone who has roots in the dominant class of a post-colonial society, but whose experience of migration has led him to articulate the experience of the subordinate masses. Rushdie writes of the poet ‘bringing newness into the world’ for this reason. We might use his own case to illuminate the trajectory through which this occurs (Rushdie: 1988: 272).

Bourdieu’s tantalisingly brief comments on how a sociological analysis of production affects literary value reinforce these views, not least in his assessment of Flaubert’s ‘singular’ achievement (1992: 9–14). For by removing the singularity of the creator in order to emphasise social relations, literary experience can be rediscovered

at the end of the task of reconstructing the space in which the author finds himself encompassed and included as a point. To recognise this point in the literary space, which is also the point from which is formed a singular point of view on that space, is to be in a position to understand and to feel ... the singularity of that position and of the person who occupies it, and the extraordinary effort which, at least in the particular case of Flaubert, was necessary to make it exist. (1996: xvii)

Notes

1. In sixteenth-century France, of course, the monarchical State and theological authorities used the threat of hanging to censor the reading of Protestant texts (Lefebvre and Martin, 1976: 310–12).

2. Bourdieu estimates that only 10 per cent of the French population were concerned with photographs as aesthetic objects in 1965 (1990c: 182).

3. Brubaker (1985) is an exception to this.

4. Willis’s sensitive study of working-class nonconformists at school, mentioned by Bourdieu in Language, shows in much the same way that their culture valorises their exuberant laughter and patriarchal masculinity, rejecting the consumption patterns of the middle-class school conformists as effeminate (1977).

5. Ancient Judaism, on which Bourdieu draws, has a much richer historical analysis than Economy and Society, particularly in its explanation of the social relations of the prophets and the Jewish people. Could it be a less canonised text for this reason?

6. This was not unrelated, no doubt, to the fact that sales of bohemian artists were very low: Zeldin quotes the figures for Les Fleurs du mal (1857) as 1,300, while Verlaine’s Poètes maudits (1884) sold even fewer (253 copies). However it should also be noted that not only did Zola have large sales, as Bourdieu acknowledges (594,000 copies for Nana (1871) and L’Assommoir (1876)), but some other bohemian writers, also now consecrated, have had high sales at the time of first publication. For example, Proust sold 449,000 copies of Du Côté de chez Swann (1913), thus equalling the achievement of the ‘queen of romance’, Mme de Ségur (Zeldin, 1977: 358–9). These differences are inadequately explained by Bourdieu’s theory.

7. These readings of modernism are also a feature of Simmel’s sociology. In the only reference to Simmel of which I am aware, Bourdieu stresses the closeness between his own concept of aesthetic attitude and Simmel’s aesthetic disposition in which the interest in pure, contentless form derives from the experience of those who possess sufficient leisure to ‘live to see’ (1971: 1372–3).
8. Bourdieu is too polemical on Courbet at this point: his Realism should be seen as the outcome of combined relationships – his own class position and the political group to which he belonged as well as his position-taking in the movements of the artistic field.

9. This position-taking in the literary field has been closely described by Balibar and Macherey: 'The root of this constitutive repression is the objective status of literature as an historic ideological form, its relation to the class struggle. And the first and last commandment in its ideology is: “Thou shalt describe all forms of class struggle save that which determines thine own self”' (1981: 86).

10. Bourdieu goes further and sometimes represents artists as particularly venal: ‘One soon learns in conversations with these [gallery-owners] that, with a few illustrious exceptions seemingly designed to recall the ideal, painters and writers are deeply self-interested, calculating, obsessed with money and ready to do anything to succeed’ (1980a: 266).