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The historical universal: the role of cultural value in the historical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu

Tony Bennett

Abstract

Best known for his pioneering study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, in which the aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness is accounted for as the expression of a class ethos, Bourdieu has become something of an icon of relativism. In thus effecting a Bakhtinian ‘discrowning’ of official hierarchies of the arts, he is often celebrated for his concern to place all tastes, popular and high, on a similar footing, equally rooted in specific class practices. Only a careless inattention could support such a conclusion. From his early interventions in French cultural policy debates up to and including *The Rules of Art* and *Pascalian Meditations* (1996), Bourdieu has consistently repudiated the view that a sociological approach to questions of aesthetic judgment must result in a levelling form of relativism. In exploring why this should be so, this paper considers the issues at stake in the forms of ‘historical universalism’ that are associated with Bourdieu’s account of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere. It does so with a view to identifying some of the difficulties underlying his understanding of sociology as a historical practice.

Keywords: Aesthetic; cultural capital; evolution; field; habitus; intellectual

In a revealing reflection on *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu contends that the ostensible object of this study (the social composition of the art museum public) had detracted attention from its real object: a sociology of artistic perception whose purpose was to demonstrate ‘the historicity of the categories of perception, naively held to be universal and eternal, that we apply to a work of art’ by making apparent ‘the social conditions of possibility of this *historical transcendental* that we call “taste” ’ (Bourdieu 1993a: 266). That he had in mind not merely a sociological critique of cultic forms of aesthetic consumption is made clear when Bourdieu goes on to say that there was something more at stake for him in this study – something which he had deliberately hidden in case his work fell foul of the positivist climate which prevailed in sociology, especially American sociology, when *The Love of Art* (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991) was first published in 1969. That something was ‘to found a science of aesthetic knowledge’ conceived as ‘a particular and privileged case of practical knowledge’ (Bourdieu 1993a: 267) that depended on distinctive cognitive operations which, while different from those of theoretical or scientific knowledge, are not reducible to the kinds of ‘mystical communion or ineffable participation’ (Bourdieu 1993a: 267) that characterize charismatic forms of arts consumption. His aspiration, in other words, was to examine the social and historical conditions underlying the development of aesthetic forms of perception in a manner which, far from relativizing questions of aesthetic judgment, would make it possible to recognize the universal value that inhered in particular works as a result of their emergence from historical processes of a particular kind.

In what follows, my primary concern is with the forms of historical reasoning Bourdieu deploys in advancing an account of aesthetic value that is neither idealist nor essentialist but which none the less insists that literary and artistic works differ in value in accordance with the degree to which they have stored up the material history that has shaped them. This involves a consideration of Bourdieu’s account of the autonomy of the artistic and literary fields and their role in providing the enabling conditions for the emergence and development

of what he calls the 'historical universal'. In examining the forms of historical reasoning that are involved here, I draw on the role that competitive struggle plays in Darwinian narratives of natural history to highlight the distinctive form of temporality that characterizes Bourdieu's account of the history of the literary and artistic fields. I then consider how the specific narratives of time that characterize Bourdieu's work inform his account of the practice of historical anamnesis and its role in the formation of the collective intellectual as the bearer of the 'historical universal'. This prepares the ground for a review of the more evident difficulties associated with the role that concepts of historical transcendence and universality play in Bourdieu's historical sociology and the political programme for the conduct of intellectuals he derives from these. I conclude by considering some of the ambiguities associated with Bourdieu's commitment to a politics of freedom derived from Enlightenment aesthetics. First, though, I look at the more general currency of references to the 'historical universal' in Bourdieu's work to highlight the difficulties this concept creates for the widespread interpretation of Bourdieu as an icon of relativism.

The historical universal: cultural politics and policies

Distinction opens with a move which 'discrowns' the Kantian aesthetic in a Bakhtinian sense by bringing it down to the same level as the popular and sensuous pleasures of everyday life.¹

The science of taste and of cultural consumption begins with a transgression that is in no way aesthetic: it has to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable 'choices', such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle. This barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption abolishes the opposition, which has been the basis of high aesthetics since Kant, between the 'taste of sense' and the 'taste of reflection', and between facile pleasure, pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses, and pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure, which is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence and a measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man. (Bourdieu 1984: 6)

It is in the light of passages like this that Bourdieu's work has often been interpreted as relativist, widely celebrated (or condemned) for his preparedness to place all tastes, popular and high, on a similar footing, equally rooted in specific class practices. There are a number of different variants of this position. In cultural studies, Bourdieu has often been invoked to contest the validity of aesthetic distinctions between high and popular forms – sometimes, in ways that Bourdieu would have endorsed, to insist on the need to take the latter seriously, and, at others, asserting or implying an equivalence of value of all cultural forms in ways he would clearly have contested. Fiske (1992) is an example of this second position. In literary and aesthetic theory, the most influential interpretation of Bourdieu's work in support of aesthetic relativism has been Smith (1988), albeit that Guillory (1993) provides a compelling critique of this position. Shusterman (1992) proposes a nuanced combination of Bourdieu's work and the aesthetic pragmatism of John Dewey that often unsettles Bourdieu's distinction between the fields of restricted and extended cultural production.

¹ For Bakhtin, 'discrowning' referred to the lowering of high or official forms of culture brought about through their parodic inversion or debasement in the practices of carnival: see Bakhtin (1968).

Bourdieu's essays on the organization of cultural production and the economy of symbolic goods also seem to point in a similar direction. In his account of the field of restricted cultural production, Bourdieu insists that 'the disavowal of the "economy" ' associated with the commitment to art as an end in itself that characterizes the behaviour of various agents in this field (the author, artist, critic, art dealer, publisher or theatre manager) is itself a form of 'economic rationality' which, once the symbolic capital it represents has been cashed in, will yield both symbolic and economic profit to its champions (Bourdieu 1993: 76). Here, as in *Distinction*, the ethos of disinterestedness is brought down to earth in being depicted as tangled up with specific kinds of interested economic calculation. In the cultural policy literature, similarly, Bourdieu's name is routinely invoked to provide a theoretical context and legitimation for policies which aim to promote a greater equality of access to, participation in, and support for all kinds of cultural activity irrespective of the value placed on them within official hierarchies of the arts. McGuigan thus takes Bourdieu as his example of a relativizing approach to the relations between cultural theory and cultural policy against which to pitch his own advocacy of aesthetically normative approaches to such questions (McGuigan 1996: 30–50). Rowse (1985) had a significant influence on cultural policy debates in Australia, invoking Bourdieu in support of funding priorities focused on the popular arts. Relativists' interpretations of Bourdieu have similarly informed a number of studies of museum visitor profiles – see, for example, Merriman (1991) – and are invoked in support of more generalized forms of cultural measurement (see Mercer 2002). In the context of recent debates concerning the need for aesthetic evaluations that will establish distinctions of quality within television, Street (2000) similarly opposes a concern with such questions to what he characterizes as Bourdieu's neo-functionalism.

Yet Bourdieu has always maintained a careful distance from such interpretations of his work. Take the passage I reproduce below in which Bourdieu, drawing on the research he had undertaken for *The Love of Art* (originally commissioned by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs), took to task the belief that cultural animation projects and access and equity programmes could significantly affect the patterns of social participation in the arts. For Bourdieu, such programmes could amount to little more than bad faith given their inability to significantly impede the dynamics of social distinction arising out of the relations between cultural capital, the education system and the institutions of art:

Indeed, we can also question the real function of the policy that consists in encouraging and supporting marginal and largely inefficient bodies as long as everything possible has not been implemented that might force and authorize the academic institution to fulfil the function incumbent on it both *de facto* and *de jure*, which is to develop in all members of society, without distinction, an aptitude for those cultural practices considered by society as most noble. (Bourdieu 2002: 67)

Bourdieu's immediate target in this study was the charismatic ideology of art underlying André Malraux's programme as France's first Minister for Culture. To Malraux's belief that great art could be made immediately and intuitively accessible to all, Bourdieu counterposes the need for a 'rational pedagogy of culture' as the only means of promoting more general forms of accessibility to works of high culture.² Yet Bourdieu does not challenge the emphasis that Malraux's policies placed on access to those cultural practices which society

² My assessments of Bourdieu's position in French cultural policy debates draw substantially on the accounts presented in Ahearne (2004) and Loosely (1995; 2004).

considers 'most noble'. Nor has he ever done so. He was, to the contrary, hostile to the cultural development programmes developed during the cultural ministries of Jacques Duhamel in the 1970s and of Jacques Lang in the 1980s as condescendingly populist in assigning an equal value to all kinds of culture irrespective of the structural forces organizing them into relations of domination and subordination.

The basis for these objections consists in his view of the distinctive forms of value that have been stored up and accumulated within works of art as a consequence of the dynamics governing the development of the literary and artistic fields and their relationships to the economic and political fields. This defence of their role as repositories of what he called the 'historical universal' was particularly clear in his later work. Here, for example, is what he says in *Pascalian Meditations*:

There is, appearances notwithstanding, no contradiction in fighting *at the same time against* the mystificatory hypocrisy of abstract universalism *and for* universal access to the conditions of access to the universal, the primordial objective of all genuine humanism which both universalistic preaching and nihilistic (pseudo-) subversion forget. (Bourdieu 2000: 71)

To dispel any doubt as to what 'nihilistic (pseudo-) subversion' might mean, he adds, a few pages later, that the 'cult of "popular culture"' usually amounts to little more than an

inversion of the class racism which reduces working-class practices to barbarism or vulgarity . . . which, under the guise of exalting the working class, helps to enclose it in what it is by converting privation into a choice or an elective accomplishment. (Bourdieu 2000: 76)

These formulations echo those of two earlier texts – Bourdieu's conversations with Hans Haacke (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995), and his book on television (Bourdieu 1998a) – in which Bourdieu champions the right of artists and intellectuals to defend the autonomy of the artistic and intellectual fields against the increasing 'marketization' of cultural production associated with neoliberal cultural and economic policies, and to do so even at the price of appearing elitist. For it is, Bourdieu argues, only the autonomy of these fields that can secure the conditions needed if works of universal value are still to be produced. But this defence is accompanied by the demand that those responsible for protecting and nurturing the universal must also accept responsibility for generalizing access to it:

In other words, we have to defend the conditions of production necessary for the progress of the universal, while working to generalise the conditions of access to that universality. . . . We must work to universalise the conditions of access to the universal. (Bourdieu 1998a: 66)

There is then, for Bourdieu, no equivalence of value stretching across the fields of restricted and general cultural production. Since only the former can serve as the incubator for the 'historical universal', generalizing social access to this while at the same time providing the means of intellectual access that will allow the works produced in this field to be appropriated as instances of the historical universal, rather than as signs of social distinction, are the ultimate guiding principles for the direction of education and cultural policies – always, for Bourdieu, necessarily paired – that can be derived from Bourdieu's work. At the

same time, however, there is nothing essentialist in this attribution of value to the field of restricted cultural production. To the contrary, it is clear that Bourdieu aimed, through the particular form of historicizing cultural products that he proposed, to produce an account of the historical formation of value that would steer a way between what he saw as the equally false options of relativism and the eternalization of a-historical essences:

But historicising them [cultural products: TB] is not only (as some think) to relativise them, recalling that they have meaning only with reference to a determined state of the field of struggles; it also means giving them back their necessity by tearing them out of the indeterminacy which stems from a false eternalisation and relating them back to the social conditions of their genesis – a truly generative definition. (Bourdieu 1996: 298)

Neither indifferently relativizing nor abstractly universalizing, Bourdieu's historical universalism arises out of a relationist perspective in which different forms of value accrue to different kinds of work depending on the positions they occupy in relation to one another within the processes of production and consumption informing the organization and dynamics of different fields of cultural production. It is to this matter, therefore, that I now turn.

The historical structure of the literary and artistic fields

In the Preface to *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu asks whether scientific analysis is doomed to destroy aesthetic pleasure, and whether the sociologist must be 'wedded to relativism, to the levelling of values, to the lowering of greatness' (Bourdieu 1996: xiv). These are purely rhetorical questions, setting the scene for Bourdieu's contention that only a sociological perspective – correctly conceived and applied – holds out the prospect of enriching and deepening aesthetic appreciation and understanding. It does so, he argues, by simultaneously being able to show how the work of art is both historic and transhistoric: historic in the sense that it is the product of a particular set of social and historical circumstances and relations of cultural production; transhistoric in the sense that it is the very mode of the work of art's conditioning by the social relations of its production that allows it to pull free from and transcend the time-bound and limiting effects of its historical period to achieve ongoing value as a source of valid knowledge and self-knowledge.

How does he do this? I want to place the accent here on the *how* since Bourdieu is by no means the first to advance claims of this kind. They are, to the contrary, a fairly well-worn trope in the sociology of art and literature and, even more so, in Marxist aesthetic theory. Here, however, the injunction – to paraphrase Frederic Jameson (1981) – that analysis should always historicize has usually turned out to mean placing the work of art within a narrative of History and to so read the relations between the two that canonical works emerge as offering privileged forms of historical self-understanding.³ This is, however, very much history in the abstract which, while assigning works of art their place within larger narrative accounts of the direction and meaning of social development, rarely descends to consider the mundane details of particular forms of literary production and distribution except to denigrate these as, in one of Georg Lukács's favourite phrases, 'vulgar sociology'.⁴ Bourdieu's procedure differs

³ I draw here on an earlier discussion (Bennett 1990) of this aspect of Marxist theory.

⁴ Sometimes directed against what he characterized as bourgeois forms of empiricism, Lukács also used this phrase to criticize the mechanical materialism of the Soviet doctrine of socialist realism. The essays in Lukács (1970) give a good sense of both sets of issues.

to the extent that these are precisely the kinds of issues he is concerned with, grounding his account of the social production of aesthetic value in the organization of the literary and artistic fields and its consequences for the material calculations and strategies of producers, consumers and a whole range of intermediary agents – publishers, museum directors, gallery owners, etc. – involved in the practical functioning of those fields.

Yet there is still a narrative at work in Bourdieu's account, albeit a surprising one in as much as its governing metaphors – ones of evolution and struggle, of survival and accumulation – are clearly Darwinian. And conspicuously so: in *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu parades a whole series of evolutionary conceptions in his account of the organization of the literary and artistic fields and the struggle – a 'struggle for life, for survival' (Bourdieu 1996: 157) – this gives rise to between different positions in those fields and the strategies of capital accumulation they permit. This partly reflects the fact that, especially through Flaubert, Darwinian conceptions informed the vocabulary through which artists and writers in the late nineteenth century French literary and artistic fields – the only cases Bourdieu studies in detail – represented their struggles for autonomy. However, the matter runs more deeply than this in as much as Darwinian metaphors also provide the key to Bourdieu's understanding of the distinctive form of temporality governing the literary and artistic fields and regulating the relations between the different positions that are available within those fields.

In Darwin's account of the evolution of species, the relations between species as they exist at any one point in time is an historical summation of all that has gone before as variations which have proved successful in the struggle for life are viewed as a part of the accumulated inheritance of each species. Temporalization, in Darwinian narratives, is thus the result of struggle, just as struggle always leaves its mark in the present as a set of decipherable traces through which the history of the past struggles that have led to the present organization of life can be reconstructed.⁵ This essentially archaeological historicity in which each stage of evolution both stores and registers a departure from those preceding it, recapitulating the past even as it breaks with it, played an important role in Darwin's concern to distance his work from two rival forms of historicity: the idealist biblical account of creation and Georges Cuvier's account of species development as a discontinuous history in which different creations are separated from one another by catastrophes (Rudwick 1997). The continuous, cumulative sequences of lineal descent Darwin's account established thus demonstrated that 'species are produced and exterminated by slowly acting and still existing causes, and not by miraculous acts of creation and by catastrophes' (Darwin 1968: 457).

For Bourdieu, similarly, 'the history of the field is the history of the struggle for a monopoly of the imposition of legitimate categories of perception and appreciation', just as 'it is in the very *struggle* that the history of the field is made; it is through struggles that it is temporalised' (Bourdieu 1996: 157). In the space of the artistic field, Bourdieu therefore argues, 'distances between styles or lifestyles are never better measured than in terms of time' (Bourdieu 1996: 159). This same principle applies to all agents and institutions in the field: galleries or publishing houses, like painters or writers, are distributed at any one time according to their artistic age, that is according to the antiquity of their mode of artistic production and according to the degree of canonisation and the influence of that generative schema which is at one and the same time a schema of perception and appreciation. (Bourdieu 1996: 158)

⁵ The literature on this subject is vast. I draw here mainly on Canghuilem (1988), Steadman (1979) and Bennett (2004).

While empirically illuminating when applied to the forms of historicization that result from the struggles between agents in particular artistic fields at particular historical moments – and not just in the French context⁶ – Bourdieu further contends that the history of art as such, at least in its Western forms, is governed by similar principles. This partly reflects what others have identified as the metaphysical role that Bourdieu accords competition as a constitutive aspect of human social practice. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow thus argue that the basic principle underlying Bourdieu's account of the organization of social life, providing the dynamism propelling each field and the relations between them, is 'competition, not just for life and security as in Hobbes, but for advantage, and not just material advantage as in Marx, but more general symbolic advantage' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1993: 40). What the references to Hobbes and Marx miss, however, are the respects in which this account of the role of competition is also connected to the distinctive historical ontology that characterizes Bourdieu's account of the relations between habitus and field. Craig Calhoun (1993) has usefully highlighted this aspect of Bourdieu's work, noting the respects in which the structure of any field is always immanently historical, thus calling for, as Bourdieu puts it,

a structural history which finds in each state of the structure both the product of previous struggles to transform or conserve the structure, and, through the contradictions, tensions and power relations that constitute that structure, the source of its subsequent transformations. (Bourdieu 1990: 42)

The sources of social action, whether it be that of the artist, scientist, or civil servant, Bourdieu argues, are to be found in the legacies of past struggles that are stored up in the relations between both things, in the forms of institutions, and persons in the form of 'the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions which I call habitus' (Bourdieu 1990: 190). The socio-somatic aspects of habitus as a social storage mechanism operative within the person owes much to Merleau Ponty (Butler 1999) and, of course, to Marcel Mauss and, via Mauss, to the range of socio-somatic mechanisms associated with Darwinian and post-Darwinian accounts of evolutionary inheritance (see Otis 1994).

It is in the relations between field and habitus, then, that the different temporalities of events and structures can be integrated into one. They provide, as Bourdieu puts it,

the means of filling in the gap between the slow and imperceptible movements of the economic or demographic infrastructure and the surface agitation recorded by the day-to-day chronicles of political, literary or artistic history. (Bourdieu 1990: 190).

They also provide, in the case of the literary and artistic fields, for a mechanism of temporalization that is unidirectional, progressive and cumulative owing to the extent to which the innovations of form, style, content or genre resulting from past struggles are 'recorded, codified and canonised by the whole corpus of professionals of conservation and celebration – historians of art and literature, exegetes, analysts' to become 'part of the conditions of entry into the field of restricted production' (Bourdieu 1996: 242). Such innovations and their conservation, that is to say, become a part of the history of the field that has to be mastered by those cultural producers whose capital accumulation strategies bank on

⁶ See, for example, Grenfall and Hardy (2003) for a telling application of this aspect of Bourdieu's work to the organization of the contemporary British art field.

the symbolic profits that accrue to those who make a new move within the field, opening it up to new possibilities. Each innovation, however, displaces not only its immediate predecessor but, at the same time, the whole series of displaced predecessors that comprises the history of art:

This model stands out with particular clarity today because, by virtue of an almost perfect unification of the artistic field and its history, each artistic act which leave its mark by introducing a new position in the field ‘displaces’ the entire series of previous artistic acts. By the fact that the whole series of pertinent ‘coups’ is present in practice in the last one, an aesthetic act is irreducible to any other act situated in another position in the series and the series itself tends towards uniqueness and irreversibility. (Bourdieu 1996: 160).

It is true, of course, that the narrative trope of accumulation that is so strong in Bourdieu’s work owes as much to Marx as to Darwin, especially in view of the influence that Darwin’s account of the struggle for existence exerted on Marx’s account of the relationships between competition and capital accumulation (see Beer 1985: 57–8). There is, however, an important difference, long noted in the literature. For whereas Marx’s account of capital accumulation is one of interrupted development in which value is lost or written off as a result of successive crises of profitability, Darwin always stressed the long, continuous, step-by-step progression of natural evolution in which nothing is lost without at the same time being preserved and carried forward into the next step. It is this trope, in particular, that Bourdieu draws on so extensively in *The Rules of Art*. ‘The history of the field,’ Bourdieu thus contends, ‘is thus truly irreversible; and the products of this relatively autonomous history present a kind of ‘*cumulativity*’ (Bourdieu 1996: 242) – a formulation which he later extends in contending that ‘“time” in the history of art is really irreversible, and that it presents a form of *cumulatively*’ (Bourdieu 1996: 301). Avant-gardes, by expanding the reach of this ‘cumulativity’, simultaneously historicize prevailing aesthetic conventions by making them obsolete and, thereby, unable to generate symbolic profits in the field of restricted cultural production. This is a form of temporality which Bourdieu, drawing on the language of evolutionary thought, also argues generates its throwbacks and survivals in those artists who continue to produce using codes and conventions which have been historically superseded. ‘Fossils of another age’, Bourdieu writes of those painters who supplied the galleries of the Right Bank in *fin-de-siècle*

Paris, these painters who do in the present what was done by the avant-garde of the past (just like *forgers*, but on their own account) make an art that is not, if one may say so, of their age. (Bourdieu 1996: 150).

There are close parallels between this account and the Russian Formalists’ account of the evolution of literary systems as the outcome of practices of estrangement and defamiliarization through which the literary devices developed in previous cycles of literary innovation are ruptured, shown to be arbitrarily conventional and limiting, and thereby rendered historically canonical, valued and preserved as significant moments in the prehistory of the literary present, but as prehistory none the less (Bennett 2003: 149–53). There are, however, equally significant differences between the two accounts. For the Russian Formalists, the temporalization of the literary field was viewed as *sui generis*, arising out of a dynamic that was entirely internal to the literary field. For Bourdieu, by contrast, it is not the purely internal logic of an abstracted and a-historical process of defamiliarization that determines the periodization of the literary and artistic fields or provides the motor power for

their accumulative momentum. This rather comes directly from the strategies and calculations guiding the actions of the different ‘players’ – writers, painters, sculptors, art historians, curators, gallery owners, literary agents and critics – within the processes through which art and literature are produced, reproduced, circulated and consumed. On the one hand, then, Bourdieu concurs with the Russian Formalists that the repertoire of moves that are possible at any given moment depends on how different literary and artistic schools, genres, writerly and painterly conventions, etc., are positioned in relation to one another within existing literary or artistic systems (for the Formalists) or fields (for Bourdieu). On the other hand, he contends that the actual directions and dynamics of change – the actual paths taken amid myriad possibilities – can only be understood by referring this plane of formal analysis to the interesting exercise of both material power and symbolic force on the part of agents and institutions within the field.⁷ ‘Having totally vital interests in the possibilities offered as instruments and stakes in the struggle,’ he writes, ‘these agents and institutions use all the powers at their disposal to activate those which seem the most in accord with their specific intentions and interests’ (Bourdieu 1996: 201–2). This means that literariness is construed not as a given transhistoric essence, as in Formalist theory, but as an historical artefact – ‘a sort of *historical quintessence*, that is, the product of a long and slow work of historical alchemy which accompanies the process of autonomization of the fields of cultural production’ (Bourdieu 1996: 139). The ‘sublimated essence of the universal’, Bourdieu contends, can thus only be extracted from ‘the often merciless clash of passions and selfish interests’, requiring a stoic renunciation of the ‘angelic belief in a pure interest in pure form’ (Bourdieu 1996: xviii).

The development of the literary and artistic fields and their acquisition of an accumulating depth and complexity is thus the outcome of competitive struggles between agents in those fields. Bourdieu’s account of their progressively developing autonomy is based on similar principles to his account of the history of reason as one which, in contrast to what he sees as the ‘transcendental illusionism’ of Habermas’s account (Bourdieu 1998: 89–90), must be based on a *realpolitik* of reason that can account for the production of a constituency with a material interest in the disinterested pursuit of truth.⁸ I therefore look next at the implications Bourdieu draws from this account of the historical structure of the literary, artistic and intellectual fields for the ways in which the achievements that have been stored up and accumulated within them are to be retrieved and related to the present in an intellectual politics based on the principles of ‘historical universalism’.

Historical anamnesis and the practice of freedom

In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu records that he never ‘felt justified in existing as an intellectual’ (Bourdieu 2000: 7) and tried hard to exorcise from his work all those manifestations of scholastic reason which entail a denial of, and distancing from, the necessities of the social world. This has always been an aspect of Bourdieu’s literary persona. Writing as both an insider to the fields of culture and knowledge, as one familiar with the rules of the game and, indeed, an adept player, and as an outsider, he draws on the distancing methods of sociology to show how the moves of such games derive their intelligibility –

⁷ This also distinguishes Bourdieu’s approach to the development of the literary and artistic fields from the systems theory approach of Niklas Luhmann (2000).

⁸ Bourdieu’s insistence that the development of critical intellectual practice has to be understood as connected to the interests of particular strata stands in marked contrast to Adorno’s attempt to establish a basis for critique in a position of redemption outside the clash of interests (Karakayali 2004)

otherwise invisible or, in cultic conceptions of the arts, simply denied – from their relations to the vulgar material conditions of cultural production and the strategies of capital accumulation to which these give rise. Yet Bourdieu was equally concerned that something that has been painstakingly made should not be thrown away or dismissed out of hand. This helps to explain why aesthetic value is, for Bourdieu, no more something to be written off than, for Bruno Latour (1999), the results of scientific work are to be discounted because they can be shown to be the result of the practice of scientists in particular and determinate relations of knowledge production. I make this comparison with Latour not because either Bourdieu or Latour does but because the accounts of the production of, respectively, aesthetic and scientific entities that the two offer are, in some respects, strikingly similar. Both, for example, make extended use of the concepts of purification and fabrication to stress the made-up nature of those entities, and both insist that their ‘madeupness’ does not detract in the least from their reality and effectivity.⁹ To the contrary, it is true for both that the reality and force of entities in the cultural and epistemological fields increases in proportion to the amount of effort that is invested in their initial fabrication and subsequent reproduction. This is why Bourdieu so insistently stresses the laborious work that was involved in the processes through which Flaubert and his generation fabricated the autonomy of the literary and artistic fields by distancing their activities from the twin poles of necessity (the economy) and power (politics and bureaucracy). And it is why he stresses the need for continuing work of this kind – by writers, artists, curators and critics – if the autonomy of these fields is to be maintained and developed.

He also sees a need for a distinctive kind of intellectual practice to sustain and generalize such efforts. Though the perspective that ‘being is history’ means that one must ‘demand of biological history (with the theory of evolution) and sociological history (with the analysis of the collective and individual sociogenesis of forms of thought) the truth of a reason which is historical through and through and yet irreducible to history’, it takes a particular kind of historical self-reflection ‘to extract reason most effectively from historicity’ (Bourdieu 1996: 310). Or again:

To escape (however slightly) from history, understanding must know itself as historical and give itself the means to understand itself historically; and it must, in the same movement, understand historically the historical situation in which what it labours to understand was formed. (Bourdieu 1996: 310).

The project through which understanding is thus to reflect on, and bring to consciousness, the history of its own formation, and, thereby, distil the value that has been stored up within the artistic, literary and intellectual fields is that of historical anamnesis. A term which, via Freud, he borrows from Plato, anamnesis is, for Bourdieu, a process of recovery and recollection – a bringing to consciousness of forgotten or hidden processes. When applied to aesthetic works, anamnesis aims to retrieve such works from the kinds of essentialist and cultic misunderstandings that afflict those whose vantage point is restricted to a position within the field and, as a consequence, merely registers the lived experience of the aesthetic

⁹ This is not to overlook the differences between them, however. Bourdieu’s accounts of such processes remains cast within the framework of a realist epistemology in contrast to Latour’s constructivism. Bourdieu, moreover, is clearly the main target Latour has in mind in his generalized criticisms of sociology’s claim to be able to uncover the real motives of social action in underlying structural causes which remain hidden from, or only partially accessible to, social actors (see e.g. Latour 2004: 154–6).

work while bracketing out the history of autonomization that has made that experience possible. ‘It is only by mobilising all the resources of the social sciences,’ Bourdieu argues, that one can bring to fruition that historicist form of the transcendental project which consists of reappropriating, by historical anamnesis, the historical forms and categories of artistic experience. (Bourdieu 1996: 288).

The procedures of anamnesis thus return thought to itself historically by recalling the cumulative weight of those successive determinations which have formed it in accordance with a temporal logic that is irreversible. Recalling to thought the forgotten history that has shaped it, anamnesis offers the means for ‘a true reconquest of the self’ (Bourdieu 1996: 312) that will, in its turn, enable a practice of freedom in the prospect it opens up, not of escaping, but of regulating the determinations that have shaped it. In this way, the promise of an ‘*historical transcendental*’ (Bourdieu 1996: 288) that is opened up by the historical autonomization of the artistic, literary and intellectual fields might, Bourdieu suggests, ‘be carried to its conclusion’ (Bourdieu 1996: 312). The contemporary form that this project must take, Bourdieu suggests in his postscript to *The Rules of Art*,¹⁰ is that of the organization of a ‘collective intellectual’ in which intellectuals and artists will act corporately in their own interests in view of the congruence between these and the historical transcendental value of the autonomy of the artistic and intellectual fields. Their current task, Bourdieu argues, is to defend the value of this autonomy against the increasingly corrosive encroachments of the economy, bureaucracy, and technical reasoning. In such a context the practice of historical anamnesis becomes directly political in view of the importance of making ‘as explicit as possible the unconscious deposited in each intellectual by the very history of which intellectuals are the products’ (Bourdieu 1996: 340).

We can see, in the light of these considerations, why questions concerning the mode of appropriation of works of art, literature and restricted culture more generally are so important for Bourdieu. The critical ideal he has in mind is one that would simultaneously weaken the connections through which the cultural consumption of aesthetically coded works is tied to practices of social distinction while simultaneously expanding the influence of artists, writers and intellectuals – and their ways of reading aesthetic texts as a means for a deepened and cumulating historical self-understanding – to overcome the division between restricted and extended culture by extending the principles governing the former into the latter. This requires, he argues in *On Television and Journalism*, the vigilant defence of the autonomy of restricted culture, securing its ‘ivory tower’ *modus operandi* by supporting the production of cultural works that meet the specialist standards of judgment of agents within that field (artists, writers, etc) against the requirements of ‘marketability’ or, indeed, of immediate accessibility (Bourdieu 1998a: 59–64). And this in turn requires a dualistic orientation in relation to the state,¹¹ as Bourdieu urges that cultural producers should both argue for an enhanced role of cultural sponsorship for the state – as the only possible agent capable of acting in the general interest – while at the same time insisting on the right, indeed duty, of

¹⁰ Bourdieu presents this postscript as an explicitly normative departure from the scientific analysis put forward in the earlier chapters of *The Rules of Art*, albeit one he suggests is warranted by the conclusions reached in those chapters. My purpose is to suggest that the normative position Bourdieu takes here also imbues the categories of analysis he deploys in his scientific discussion.

¹¹ Ahearne (2004: 47) usefully traces the transformations from Bourdieu’s earlier suspicion of state interventions in the sphere of culture to his later, but still guarded, insistence on their necessity.

intellectuals and artists to be independent of the state as they ‘learn to use against the state the freedom that the state assures them’ (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995: 72).

The reality of the issues Bourdieu is concerned with here is undeniable. The need to secure continuing state involvement in the cultural field while simultaneously warding off its intrusive political and administrative effects has become a regular aspect of the position adopted by intellectuals in relation to neo-liberalism. It needs to be said, too, that Bourdieu’s interest in these questions was not purely theoretical. He devoted considerable energy to translating the principle of the collective intellectual into active organizational forms that would empower intellectuals vis-à-vis the state more significantly than the devolved forms of ‘arms length’ administration that govern the relations between the state and different fields of arts, cultural and intellectual production (arts councils and universities, for example) in many liberal democratic societies (Ahearne 2004: 67–8). At the same time, however, there are many grounds on which Bourdieu’s formulations can be criticized: his failure to realize how closely his characterization of state/intellectual relations is dependent on post-Revolutionary French traditions, for example, and the somewhat bemusing mismatch between his championing of the collective intellectual and his extreme partisanship for his own particular brand of sociology.¹² It is, however, the principles of the historical ontology underlying his formulations that need to be engaged with if Bourdieu is to be criticized on grounds that take account of the complexity of his position in these regards.

‘False fossilization’: the contradictions of Bourdieu’s historical reasoning

Bourdieu’s conversation with Gunther Grass on the importance of intellectuals ‘speaking up’ provides a convenient route into these questions since, here, time is not quite so irreversible as it appears in *The Rules of Art*:

Bourdieu: It [neo-liberalism: TB] recasts the past in its own light and at the same time presents itself as progressive so that those who fight the return to the old ways are perceived themselves as yesterday’s news. Both of us are constantly facing this; we’re always being treated as eternally behind the times. In France, one is an ‘old iron’.

Grass: Dinosaurs . . .

Bourdieu: Exactly. There it is, the great power of conservative revolutions, ‘progressive’ restorations. (Bourdieu and Grass 2000)

The problem here, recalling Bourdieu’s remarks concerning the artists of the Right Bank who had become ‘fossils of another age’, is one of ‘false fossilization’ as unanticipated political tremors have placed time so out of joint with itself as to make those who are at the forefront of the literary and artistic fields seem historically superseded.

At one level, Bourdieu here simply registers the effects of a shift in the balance of power between different agents within the field of cultural production, and between this field and the economic and political fields. However, Bourdieu sees this as ‘a threat of a totally new sort’ (Bourdieu and Grass 2000) brought about by a change of a qualitative kind in which the

¹² Bourdieu’s endless attempts to privilege the sociologist over other intellectuals as a consequence of the forms of self-reflexivity that he sees as the necessary by-product of sociological reasoning are as tedious as they are unconvincing, and it is difficult to disagree with those who, like Latour (2004) and Dreyfus and Rabinow (1993), see this as a part of a power play aimed at epistemologically privileging sociology in relation to all other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

division between the fields of restricted and extended cultural production is now scarcely tenable owing to the degree to which commercial, bureaucratic and technocratic pressures have – quite suddenly it would seem – invaded the field of restricted production. What are we to make of an account which oscillates between stressing the unstoppable cumulative momentum of the literary and artistic fields, construing this as a property of those fields themselves, and the possibility that this momentum might be subject to sudden checks and reversals that can only be registered as historical aberrations or outside shocks? I want to briefly consider three aspects of the ways in which Bourdieu uses and interprets the forms of historical reasoning he proposes for the light they throw on this question.

The first concerns his failure to distinguish properly between, first, the processes of autonomization characterizing particular artistic and literary fields in particular moments of their history and, second, autonomization as a cumulative process that is held to be operable across different epochs and national societies in the form of a generalized account of the development of Western art. While Bourdieu's own accounts of autonomization in *fin-de-siècle* France are concrete, focused, empirically based and theoretically probing, his longer histories are constructed by stitching together different moments in the development of Western artistic practices as connecting parts of cumulative narratives which occlude significant aspects of their specific histories.¹³ *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu 2000) thus offers an account of the autonomization of the artistic and literary fields as a process that starts, alongside the development of the philosophical and scientific fields, with the Greeks. Bourdieu then traces the subsequent autonomization and differentiation of these fields through the Renaissance, hitching his account on to Norbert Elias's (1994) account of the civilization process and the development of Kantian aesthetics, contending that the process of autonomization achieved its mature and developed form in the late nineteenth century. And there is then relatively little after this: for Bourdieu, the *fin-de-siècle* laid down the rules of a game which persist, with no room for manoeuvre except to repeat moves that have already been made (Bourdieu 1996: 342). There are, however, real difficulties for accounts cast in this mould when faced with the evidence of the more disjunctive histories of visual culture that Hans Belting (1994; 2001), for one, has made available, especially in distinguishing the forms of temporality of both medieval religious painting and contemporary art from that of the modern art system.

The second difficulty concerns Bourdieu's account of the role that different kinds of power play in the historical dynamics of the literary and artistic fields. Bourdieu sees these fields as being structured by the relations between forms of power that are autonomous to them and those that arise from outside. Construing these relations in the form of a zero-sum game in which one form of power can only increase its sway at the expense of the other, Bourdieu sees the literary and artistic fields as being riven by an unending struggle between two principles:

the heteronomous principle, which favours those who dominate the field economically and politically (for example, 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (for example, 'art for art's sake'), which leads its most radical defenders to make of temporal failure a sign of election and of success a sign of compromise with the times. (Bourdieu 1996: 216–7).

¹³ The specificity of the cumulative historicity Bourdieu attributes to Western art fields is tellingly highlighted in Morishita's (2003) discussion of the different historicity governing the Japanese art field.

The form taken by struggles within the literary and artistic fields, and between these fields and the field of power, is that of a constant competition over

the transformation or conservation of the relative value of different kinds of capital, which itself determines, at any moment, the forces liable to be engaged in these struggles. (Bourdieu 1966: 215)

This means that the relations between different fields – the economic, the social, the political and the cultural – are concerned solely with the strategies for, and rules governing, the conversion of different forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) into one another. It is not difficult to see how this set of assumptions makes it possible to ‘think’ the historicity of fields as either unilinear movements along the direction of increasing autonomy, or checks and reversals to this tendency, arising from the relative power of different capitals. Step outside Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, however, and it becomes clear pretty quickly that the activities of agents within the literary, artistic and cultural fields are no more reducible to capital accumulation or conversion strategies than relations of culture and power can be exhaustively described in terms of capital theory. The aesthetic hierarchies, forms of exclusion and the specific forms of subjection associated with the relations between culture, race and colonialism, for example, simply cannot be recounted in these terms. This necessarily calls into question the validity of unidirectional accounts of the histories of cultural fields as if the play of power within them could be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of a single axis of autonomy versus dependence.

The third set of difficulties arises from Bourdieu’s use of the term ‘historical transcendental’ to identify two different mechanisms – first, the reproduction of relations of domination as if they were grounded in necessity, and second, the genesis of the ‘historical universal’ as a force transcending the particular historical conditions of its making. This results in a confusion of the two different kinds of historical reasoning informing these two concepts. In its most frequent usage, the historical transcendental refers to the mechanisms through which particular dispositions or social relations developed in particular circumstances are perpetuated through time via definite methods of social reproduction in ways that generate the illusion of the universality, the necessity and inevitably of what they reproduce. *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu 2001) thus offers an account of the construction of masculine domination as a historical transcendental in this sense, invoking the procedures of historical anamnesis to account for the incessant labour of reproduction through which this effect is produced. In this case, Bourdieu invokes the practice of anamnesis for the analysis of *stabilities* through time produced by historical processes of reproduction. When it comes to analysing the development of the literary and artistic fields and the formation of the collective intellectual, however, the very same practice is invoked to analyse *cumulative changes* through time. It is in the context of this latter concern that the historical transcendental slips over to become something else – the historical universal as a set of enduring values that accumulates and deepens through time.

This discrepancy introduces two different principles into the historical shaping of the habitus. Bourdieu’s account of masculine domination as a historically transcendental force rests, in part, on an analysis of the forms that masculine domination takes in the peasant society of the Kabyle and in Bloomsbury, London, as revealed by a symptomatic reading of Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*. This is presented as an analysis of the processes through which masculine domination is reproduced by treating contemporary Kabyle society *as if* it were an

archaic forerunner of 1930s Bloomsbury. Drawing on the widely discredited tropes of late-nineteenth century anthropology, Bourdieu interprets present-day Kabyle society as one in which, ‘abstracted from time’, archaic social relations have ‘survived’ into the present (Bourdieu 2001: 6). From this he moves to construe the forms of masculine domination evident among the Kabyle, as well as in Bloomsbury, ‘as the instruments of an archaeological history of the unconscious which, having no doubt been originally constructed in a very ancient and very archaic state of our societies, inhabits each of us, whether man or woman’ (Bourdieu 2001: 54). This is, by any standards, a remarkable piece of legerdemain. A procedure which presents as ‘historical’ the similarities observed between a set of ethnographic field notes relating to an Algerian peasant society gathered in the 1950s and an English novel written in the 1920s by converting the former into the archaic prehistory of the latter is, of course, anti-historical in its methods since it simultaneously evacuates two societies of their particular histories.¹⁴ My point here, though, is that the habitus of the collective intellectual is differently organized since this contains both this ancient layer of the self and the successive accretions that later histories have laid across it in a complex process of self formation that ultimately achieves self-consciousness through the critical practice of anamnesis. To briefly explore the implications of this, I conclude by looking at Bourdieu’s construction of the politics of freedom and some unresolved tensions this highlights concerning Bourdieu’s relations to Kant and to the art museum.

Aesthetics and the politics of freedom

John Guillory, discussing Bourdieu’s classic essay on the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1983), notes that it adds an issue that was not visible in *Distinction*: namely how artists who subject themselves to the demands of the autonomous world of art represent a relationship to the aesthetic disposition of disinterestedness that is different from the cultic consumption of the dominant classes (Guillory 1993: 331). This is a distinction that Bourdieu activates in his postscript to *The Rules of Art* when stating that he is addressing

not all those who conceive of culture as a patrimony, a dead culture to be made into an obligatory cult of ritual piety, or as an instrument of domination and distinction, cultural bastion and Bastille, to be erected against the Barbarians within and without . . . but rather those who conceive of culture as an instrument of freedom presupposing freedom . . . a ‘collective intellectual’ who might be capable of making a discourse of freedom heard, a discourse that recognises no other limit than the constraints and controls which each artist, each writer and each scholar, armed with all the acquisitions of his or her predecessors, enjoin upon themselves and all others. (Bourdieu 1996: 340)

Guillory also notes that, with Bourdieu, Kant’s concern with the aesthetic as a distinctive mode of production disappears entirely owing to the emphasis Bourdieu places on the aesthetic disposition as a mode of consumption (Guillory 1993: 332). The omission is significant since what it forgets are the complex relations between the role of the aesthetic in Kant’s politics of freedom and the earlier tradition of civic humanism in which the new discourse of aesthetics – particularly as fashioned by Shaftesbury – played a key role in

¹⁴ Bourdieu is clearly anxious on this point in the lengthy explanation he offers to justify this procedure. However, he fails to address Johannes Fabian’s (1983) objection that the primary distancing move of anthropology has always consisted in its denial of coevalness between the time of the observer and that of the observed.

articulating a new set of relations between freedom and governance in the context of the market society that emerged in the wake of the 1688 Revolution.¹⁵

While I cannot go into this aspect of the history of aesthetics in any detail (see, however, Chytry 1989, Klein 1994, and Poovey 1998) I raise it here since it forms a part of the historical formation of the discursive space in which Bourdieu seeks to articulate a politics of freedom. It therefore bears directly on the practice of anamnesis he advocates in calling to mind past–present continuities that would otherwise remain unconscious. For in calling on the collective intellectual to take arms against neo-liberalism, Bourdieu asks not only that intellectuals should take issue with encroachments on their autonomy of both state and market, but that they should do so as self-conscious bearers of the universal that has been deposited in the unconscious of intellectuals (but not others) as a consequence of the histories of which they are the outcomes. In projecting this universality as something still to be achieved, Bourdieu remains in the space opened up by Kant’s notion of the *sensus communis* except that, rather than projecting, as Kant did, a consensus regarding judgments of taste, he makes the more Hegelian move of projecting a universalism of reason to be progressively constructed by intellectuals, who can alone represent the universal until the conditions in which it can be recognized by all have been created.

It is, in this light, worth recalling how Hegel’s understanding of the relations between Spirit and History was linked to the art museum, particularly as Bourdieu underlines the close connection that binds the history of aesthetic theory and the philosophy of art to the development of modern artistic institutions (Bourdieu 1996: 294). For as well as its role in shaping the ‘pure gaze’ that Bourdieu discusses, the art museum has also functioned as an important aesthetic and epistemological technology of modernity through the particular form of historicity that it effects. Donald Preziosi (2003) thus argues that, over the period from the late eighteenth century to the present, art history and art museums have differentiated cultural works and practices by attributing to them different degrees of ‘semantic weight’ or ‘carrying capacity’. What he means by this is that it is only by virtue of the operations of this disciplinary and institutional nexus that different kinds of art are credited with the ability to store and preserve different degrees of information from their historical environments, and to make this available, in the future, for intellectual retrieval. This effect, he argues, arises from the capacity of art museums to detach particular works from their originating cultural contexts and to arrange them in sequential toil in relation to one another so that they might stand as the indexes of the universal histories they thus make visible. The role that Bourdieu envisages for the practice of historical anamnesis in relation to the historical universal is, in this respect, similar to the form of historicity produced by the art museum. Indeed, it is arguable that Bourdieu’s conception of the historical universal reflects the operation of such institutions. As loci for the history that is stored up within them, they both make intelligible and provide the means through which a historically shaped universality might acquire a consciousness of itself as such by communing with the accumulated record of its own formation. The concluding paragraph of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* makes the point. For when summarizing his sense of how Spirit comes into being through History as a process of conscious self-mediation, Hegel chooses the image of the art gallery as the imaginary scene for this act of historical self-shaping:

¹⁵ Although Bourdieu acknowledges the relationship between Kant and Shaftesbury, he disconnects it from a concern with the politics of freedom and converts it into one concerning aesthetics as consumption (Bourdieu 1996: 295).

This way of becoming presents a slow procession and succession of spiritual shapes (*Geistern*), a gallery of pictures, each of which is endowed with the entire wealth of Spirit, and moves so slowly just for the reason that the self has to permeate and assimilate all of this wealth of its substance. (Hegel 1971: 807)

If we can see here, how Bourdieu's understanding of cultural value affected his interpretation of the tasks of historical sociology in ways that were shaped by his own deeply modernist formation, we can also see the limitations of the political conclusions he drew from these for a period in which time is more flattened out than it used to be. But we can see also how these political formulations have their roots in the forms of historical reasoning underlying the concepts of field and habitus and the relations between them. These are clearly both matters that would warrant further investigation than has been possible here. It is hoped, however, that the lines of inquiry that have been suggested will prove fruitful for future work on these questions.

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