

*Culture Is in Danger**

I have often warned against the prophetic temptation and the pretension of social scientists to announce, so as to denounce them, present and future ills. But I find myself led by the logic of my work to exceed the limits I had set for myself in the name of a conception of objectivity that has gradually appeared to me as a form of censorship. So, today, in the face of the impending threats to culture that are overlooked by most, including writers, artists, and scientists themselves, even as they are the ones primarily concerned, I believe that it is necessary to make known as widely as possible what seems to me to be the standpoint of the most advanced research on the effects that so-called globalization processes may have on matters cultural.

Autonomy Threatened

I have described and analyzed (in my book *The Rules of Art*, in particular) the long process of autonomization at the end of which, in a number of Western countries, were constituted those social microcosms that I call "fields": the literary field,

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the scientific field, and the artistic field.* I have shown that these universes obey laws that are proper to them (the etymological meaning of the word autonomy) and at variance with the laws of the surrounding social world, particularly at the economic level. The literary and artistic worlds, for example, are very largely emancipated, at least in their most autonomous sectors, from the rule of money and interest. I have always stressed the fact that this process is not in any sense a linear and teleological development of the Hegelian type and that progress toward autonomy could be suddenly interrupted, as we have seen whenever dictatorial regimes, capable of divesting the artistic worlds of their past achievements, have been established. But what is currently happening to the universes of artistic production throughout the developed world is entirely novel and truly without precedent: the hard-won independence of cultural production and circulation from the necessities of the economy is being threatened, in its very principle, by the intrusion of commercial logic at every stage of the production and circulation of cultural goods.

The prophets of the new neoliberal gospel profess that, in cultural matters as elsewhere, the logic of the market can bring nothing but boons. Recusing the specificity of cultural goods either tacitly or explicitly (as with regard to the book trade, for which they reject any kind of protection), they assert, for example, that technological novelties and the economic innovations introduced to exploit them can only increase the quantity and quality of cultural goods on offer, and hence the satisfaction of consumers. This is on the condition, naturally,

* Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Artistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998 [1992]).

that everything the new technology and economically integrated communications groups put into circulation—that is to say, televised messages as well as books, films, or games, all generally subsumed under the term of “information”—be conceived as a mere commodity, and consequently treated as any other product and subjected to the law of profit. Thus the profusion that the increase in the number of themed digital television channels is to bring about should lead to an “explosion of media choice,” such that all demands, all tastes are satisfied. In this realm as in others, competition should, by its sole logic and especially by its association with technological progress, foster creativity. The law of profit would, here as elsewhere, be democratic since it sanctions those products with greatest popular appeal. I could back up each of these assertions with dozens of references and citations, but these would be somewhat redundant. Instead, let me offer a single quotation, from Jean-Marie Messier, the head of Vivendi-Universal, which condenses almost everything I have just said: “Millions of jobs have been created in the United States thanks to the complete deregulation of the telecommunications industry and technologies. Let us wish that France will follow suit! The competitiveness of our economy and the employment of our children are at stake. We must shed our fears and open wide the doors of competition and creativity.”

How valid are these arguments? To the mythology of the extraordinary differentiation and diversification of products one can counterpose the trend toward uniform supply at both the national and international levels. Far from promoting diversity, competition breeds homogeneity. The pursuit of audience ratings leads producers to look for omnibus products that can be consumed by *audiences of all backgrounds in all countries*

because they are weakly differentiated and differentiating: Hollywood films, *telenovelas*, TV serials, soap operas, police series, commercial music, boulevard or Broadway theater, all-purpose magazines, and best-sellers produced directly for the world market. Furthermore, competition regresses continually with the concentration of the apparatus of production and, more important, of distribution: the multiple communications networks tend increasingly to broadcast, often at the same time, the same type of products, born of the pursuit of maximum profit for minimum outlay. As is shown by the most recent merger between Viacom and CBS, that is, between a group oriented toward the production of content and a group oriented toward its distribution, the extraordinary concentration of communications corporations leads to *vertical integration such that distribution governs production*, imposing a veritable censorship by money. The integration of production, distribution, and screening leads to abuses of dominant market position such that a group's own films receive preferential treatment: 80 percent of new film releases on the Parisian market are screened in Gaumont, Pathé, and UGC cinemas or in cinemas within their groups. One would need to mention also the proliferation of multiplex cinemas, which are thoroughly subordinated to the demands of the distributors and compete unfairly with small independent cinemas, often forcing them to close.

The key point, however, is that commercial concerns, the pursuit of maximum *short-term* profit and the “aesthetic” that derives from that pursuit, are being ever more intensely and widely imposed on cultural production. The consequences of such a policy are exactly the same in the field of publishing, where very high concentration of ownership is also found: in

the United States at least, apart from two independent publishers, W. W. Norton and Houghton Mifflin, a few university presses that are themselves increasingly subjected to commercial constraints, and a handful of combative small publishers, the book trade is in the hands of eight giant media corporations. The great majority of publishers must assume an unequivocally commercial orientation and this has led, among other things, to an invasion of their lists by media stars and to censorship by money. This is particularly the case when, being integrated within multimedia conglomerates, publishers must achieve very high rates of profit. (Here I could quote Mr. Thomas Middlehoff, CEO of Bertelsmann, who, according to *La Tribune*, has given its 350 profit centers two years to ensure a return on investment of at least 10 percent.) How could one not see that the logic of profit, particularly short-term profit, is the very negation of culture, which presupposes investment for no financial return or for uncertain and often posthumous returns?

What is at stake here is the perpetuation of a cultural production that is not oriented toward exclusively commercial ends and is not subject to the verdicts of those who dominate mass media production, especially by way of the hold they exert over major channels of distribution. Indeed, one of the difficulties of the battle that must be fought on this front is that it may assume antidemocratic appearances insofar as the mass productions of the culture industry do in a sense have the backing of the general public, and particularly of young people the world over, both because they are more accessible (the consumption of these products requires less cultural capital) and because they are the object of a kind of *inverted snobbery*.

Indeed, it is the first time in history that the cheapest products of a popular culture (of a society which is economically and politically dominant) are imposing themselves as chic. The adolescents of all countries who wear baggy pants with the crotch down at knee level do not know that the fashion they regard as both ultrachic and ultramodern finds its origin in U.S. jails, as did a certain taste for tattoos! This is to say that the "civilization" of jeans, Coca-Cola, and McDonald's has not only economic power on its side but also the symbolic power exerted through a seduction to which the victims themselves contribute. By taking as their chief targets children and adolescents, particularly those most shorn of specific immune defenses, with the support of advertising and the media which are both constrained and complicit, the big cultural production and distribution companies gain an extraordinary, unprecedented hold over all contemporary societies—societies that, as a result, find themselves virtually infantilized.

When, as Ernst Gombrich pointed out, the "ecological conditions of art" are destroyed, art soon dies. Culture is threatened because the economic and social conditions in which it can develop are profoundly affected by the logic of profit in the advanced countries where there is already substantial accumulated capital (the precondition for autonomy) and a fortiori in other countries. The relatively autonomous microcosms within which culture is produced must, along with the education system, ensure the production of both producers and consumers. It took painters nearly five centuries to achieve the social conditions that made a Picasso possible. We know from reading their contracts that they had to struggle against their patrons to stop their work from being treated as a

mere product whose worth is determined by the surface painted and the cost of the colors used. They had to struggle to win the right to sign their works, that is to say, the right to be treated as authors. They had to fight for the right to choose the colors they used, the manner in which those colors are used, and even, at the very end—particularly with abstract art—the subject itself, on which the power of patronage bore especially strongly. Others, writers or musicians, have had to fight for what only recently have begun to be called “*droits d’auteurs*,” copyright and royalties; they have had to struggle for scarcity, uniqueness, and quality, and only with the collaboration of critics, biographers, professors of art history, and others have they been able to assert themselves as artists, as “creators.”

Similarly, it would take forever to enumerate the conditions that have to be fulfilled for experimental works of cinema to emerge, along with an audience to appreciate them. To list but a few: special journals and critics to sustain them, small “art-house” cinemas frequented by students, film clubs run by enthusiasts, filmmakers prepared to sacrifice everything to make films that do not achieve instant success, informed critics, producers who are sufficiently aware and cultured to finance them—in short, that whole social microcosm in which avant-garde cinema is recognized and valued, and which is presently threatened by the irruption of commercial cinema and, above all, by the domination of the big distributors, with whom producers (when they are not themselves distributors) must reckon. Now, all of that is under threat today by the reduction of works of art to products and commodities. The current struggles of filmmakers over the “final cut” and against the

pretension of producers to ultimate rights over the work are the exact equivalent of the struggles of the painters of the Quattrocento.*

These autonomous universes, which are the outcome of a protracted process of *emergence*, of evolution, have today started upon a process of *involution*: they are the locus of a backward turn, a regression from work to product, from author to engineers or technicians deploying technical resources they have not invented themselves (such as the vaunted “special effects”) or to the famous stars celebrated in the mass-market magazines and liable to pull in large audiences ill-equipped to appreciate specific, particularly formal, experimentation. And, above all, they must put these extremely costly resources to purely commercial ends, that is to say, organize them, in a quasi-cynical manner, so as to seduce the largest possible number of viewers by playing to their basic drives which other technicians, the marketing specialists, attempt to predict. So we are also seeing the emergence, in all the cultural universes, of imitation cultural productions (one could find instances of them in the realm of the novel as well as in cinema, and even in poetry with what Jacques Roubaud calls “muesli poetry”). These may go so far as to mimic the experimentation of the avant-garde while exploiting the most traditional mechanisms of commercial productions. And, given their ambiguity, they may, thanks to an effect of *allodoxia*, deceive critics and consumers with modernist pretensions.

It will be clear that the choice is not one between “global-

* Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

ization" understood as submission to the laws of commerce and hence to the reign of "commercialism," which is always and everywhere the opposite of what we understand by culture, and the defense of national cultures or this or that particular form of cultural nationalism. The kitsch products of commercial "globalization"—of blockbuster and "special effects" movies, or of "world fiction," whose authors can be indifferently Italian, Indian, or English, as well as American—are in every respect opposed to the products of the *literary, artistic, and cinematic International*, that chosen circle whose center is everywhere and nowhere, even if it was for a long time located in Paris. As Pascale Casanova showed in *La République mondiale des lettres*, the "denationalized International of creators," the Joyces, Faulkners, Kafkas, Becketts, or Gombrowiczes, pure products of Ireland, the United States, Czechoslovakia, or Poland, but who were made in Paris; or the Kaurismakis, Manuel De Oliveiras, Satyajit Rays, Kieslowskis, or Kiarostamis, and so many other contemporary filmmakers of all countries, haughtily ignored by the Hollywood aesthetic, could never have existed and subsisted without an international tradition of artistic internationalism or, more precisely, without the microcosm of producers, critics, and informed audiences required for its survival and which, having been constituted long ago, has managed to survive in precious few places spared by the commercial invasion.

For a New Internationalism

Despite appearances, this tradition of specific internationalism, proper to the realm of culture, stands radically opposed to what is called "globalization." That term, which operates both

as a password and as a watchword, is in effect the justificatory mask sported by a policy aimed at universalizing the particular interests and the particular tradition of the economically and politically dominant powers (principally the United States). It seeks to extend to the whole world the economic and cultural model most favorable to those powers, by presenting that model as a norm, an imperative, an inevitable development, and a universal destiny, so as to obtain universal allegiance—or at least universal resignation—to it. That is to say, in matters cultural it strives to universalize, by imposing them on the whole universe, the particularities of a cultural tradition within which commercial logic has been developed to the full. (Actually, but it would take too long to demonstrate this, the force of commercial logic is nothing other than the effect of a radical form of *laissez-faire*, characteristic of a social order that has given itself over to the logic of interest and immediate gratification, transformed into sources of profit, even as it presents itself under the trappings of progressive modernity. The fields of cultural production, which were instituted only very gradually through enormous sacrifices, are extremely vulnerable to the combined forces of technology and economics. Indeed, those who, in each of the cultural fields, can content themselves simply to bend with the dictates of market demand and to reap the economic or symbolic profit, such as today's "media intellectuals" and other producers of best-sellers, are always, as if by definition, more numerous and more influential in worldly terms than those who work without the slightest concession to any form of demand, that is, for a market that does not exist.)

Those who remain wedded to this tradition of cultural internationalism—be they artists, writers, scholars, but also pub-

lishers, gallery directors, or critics—in every country must now mobilize at a time when the forces of the economy, which tend by their own logic to subject cultural production and distribution to the law of immediate profit, are being powerfully bolstered by the so-called liberalization policies that the economically and culturally dominant powers aim to impose universally under cover of “globalization.” I must speak here, somewhat unwillingly, of trivial realities that normally have no place in a gathering of writers. And I must do so, moreover, knowing that I will no doubt seem to be exaggerating, that I will appear as a prophet of doom, so great are the threats that neoliberal measures pose to culture. I am thinking of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), to which various states have subscribed when they joined the World Trade Organization and whose implementation is currently being negotiated. As a number of analysts (notably Lori Wallach, Agnès Bertrand, and Raoul Jennar) have shown, the aim of that agreement is to force the 136 member states to open up all services to the laws of free exchange and hence to make it possible to turn all service activities into commodities and sources of profit, including those responding to such fundamental rights as education and culture. Clearly, this would put an end to the notion of public service and to crucial social achievements such as universal access to free education and culture in the broad sense of the term (the measure is also supposed to apply, following a recasting of current classifications, to such services as audiovisual services, libraries, archives and museums, botanical gardens and zoos, and all the services linked to entertainment, arts, theater, radio and television, sport, etc.). It is self-evident that such a program, which purports to treat as “restraints of trade” national

policies aimed at safeguarding national cultural particularities—and hence constituting obstacles to the transnational cultural industries—cannot but deny most countries (particularly those least endowed with economic and cultural resources) any hope of a development adapted to national and local particularities and respectful of diversity, in cultural matters as in all other realms. This is effected particularly by urging them to submit all national measures, domestic regulations, subsidies to establishments or institutions, licenses, etc., to the dictates of an organization that seeks to confer upon the demands of the transnational economic powers the appearance of a universal norm.

The extraordinary perversity of this policy resides in two cumulative effects: first, it is protected from criticism and opposition by the secrecy in which those who produce it have shrouded themselves; second, it is fraught with consequences, some of them intentional, that pass unnoticed at the moment of implementation by those whom they affect and which will appear only after a more or less extended time lag, thus preventing its victims from denouncing them at the outset (it is the case, for example, with all cost-minimization policies in the realm of health).

Such a policy, which puts the intellectual resources that money can mobilize in the service of economic interests (as with the “think tanks” where hired thinkers and mercenary researchers are brought together with journalists and public relations experts), should elicit unanimous rejection by all the artists, writers, and scientists most committed to autonomous research, who are its prime victims. However, apart from the fact that they are not always equipped to achieve knowledge and awareness of the mechanisms and actions that concur to

destroy the world with which their very existence is bound up, they are ill-prepared—by dint of their supremely justified, visceral attachment to autonomy (particularly from politics)—to commit themselves on the terrain of politics, be that to defend their autonomy. Ready to mobilize for a universal cause, of which the paradigm will forever be Emile Zola's intervention on behalf of Dreyfus, they are less inclined to engage in actions that have for main purpose the defense of their own specific interests and which therefore seem to them tainted with a kind of corporatist selfishness. This is to forget that by defending the interests most directly linked to their very existence (through actions of the type mounted by French filmmakers against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment), they are contributing to the defense of the most universal values, which are, through them, very directly under threat.

Actions of this type are rare and difficult: political mobilization for causes that extend beyond the corporate interests of a particular social category—truck drivers, nurses, bank clerks, or filmmakers—has always required a great deal of effort and time, and sometimes a great deal of heroism. Today the “targets” of political mobilization are extremely abstract and far removed from the daily experience of citizens, even highly educated ones: the big multinational firms and their international boards, the great international institutions, the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, with their many subsidiary bodies, designated by complicated and often unpronounceable acronyms, and all the corresponding commissions and committees of unelected technocrats little known to the wider public constitute a veritable *invisible world government*, unnoticed by most people, which wields its power upon national governments themselves. This sort of “Big Brother,” endowed

with interconnected databases on all economic and cultural institutions, is already there, in action, efficiently going about its business, deciding what we shall eat or not eat, read or not read, see or not see on television or at the movies, and so on. Meanwhile some of the most enlightened thinkers cling to the belief that what we are dealing with here is of the order of the scholastic speculations on the project of a universal state in the manner of eighteenth-century philosophers.

Through the almost absolute power they hold over the major communications companies, that is to say, over the totality of the instruments of production and distribution of cultural goods, the new masters of the world tend to concentrate the different forms of power (economic, cultural, and symbolic) that in most societies remained distinct from, if not opposed to, one another. As a result, they are in a position to impose very broadly a worldview suited to their interests. Though they are not, properly speaking, its direct producers, and though the ways they express it in the public statements of their leaders are neither among the most original nor among the most subtle, the major communications companies play a decisive role in the quasi-universal circulation of the pervasive and rampant doxa of neoliberalism, whose *rhetoric* calls for detailed analysis.

There are the logical monstrosities, such as *normative observations* (e.g., “The economy is becoming global, we must globalize our economy”; “Things are changing very quickly, we have to change”); preemptory and fallacious “deductions” (“If capitalism is winning everywhere, this is because it reflects humanity's deepest nature”); nonfalsifiable theses (“It is by creating wealth that you create employment,” “Too much taxation kills off taxation,” this latter formula being backed up for the

more highly educated by the famous Laffer curve, which another economist and professor at the Collège de France, Roger Guesnerie, demonstrated to be undemonstrable—but who is aware of this?); commonplaces that seem so far beyond question that the fact of questioning them itself seems questionable (“The welfare state and security of employment are things of the past,” and “How can you still defend the principle of public service?”); teratological paralogisms (of the type “More market means more equality” or “Egalitarianism condemns thousands of people to poverty”); technocratic euphemisms (“restructuring companies” rather than firing workers); and a welter of semantically indeterminate ready-made notions or locutions, routinized by automatic usage, that function as magic formulas, endlessly repeated for their incantatory value (“deregulation,” “voluntary redundancy,” “free trade,” “the free flow of capital,” “competitiveness,” “creativity,” “technological revolution,” “economic growth,” “fighting inflation,” “reducing the national debt,” “lowering labor costs,” “reducing welfare expenditures”).

Because it assails us constantly from all sides, this *doxa* comes in the end to acquire the quiet force of the taken-for-granted. Those who undertake to fight it can count, within the fields of cultural production themselves, neither on the support of journalism, which (with few exceptions) is structurally bound to the productions and producers most directly oriented toward the direct gratification of the widest audience, nor on that of “media intellectuals,” who, concerned above all with worldly success, owe their existence to this submission to market demands and who, in some extreme but also particularly revealing cases, can sell in the commercial sphere imitations or simulations of the avant-garde that has constructed itself

against the market. This is to say that the position of the most autonomous cultural producers, who are gradually being stripped of their means of production and especially of distribution, has never been so threatened and so weak. But it has also never been so rare, useful, and precious.

Oddly, the “purest,” most disinterested, most “formal” producers of culture thus find themselves, often unwittingly, at the forefront of the struggle for the defense of the highest values of humanity. By defending their singularity, they are defending the most universal values of all.