Distinction

A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste

Pierre Bourdieu

Translated by Richard Nice

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Preface to the English-Language Edition

I have every reason to fear that this book will strike the reader as 'very French'—which I know is not always a compliment.

French it is, of course, by virtue of its empirical object, and it can be read as a sort of ethnography of France, which, though I believe it shows no ethnocentric indulgence, should help to renew the rather stereotyped image of French society that is presented by the American tradition. But I believe it is possible to enter into the singularity of an object without renouncing the ambition of drawing out universal propositions. It is, no doubt, only by using the comparative method, which treats its object as a 'particular case of the possible', that one can hope to avoid unjustifiably universalizing the particular case. With the aid of Norbert Elias's analyses, I do indeed emphasize the particularity of the French tradition, namely, the persistence, through different epochs and political regimes, of the aristocratic model of 'court society', personified by a Parisian *haute bourgeoisie* which, combining all forms of prestige and all the titles of economic and cultural nobility, has no counterpart elsewhere, at least for the arrogance of its cultural judgements.[1] It would, however, be a mistake to regard all that is said here about the social uses of art and culture as a collection of Parisian curiosities and frivolities—and not only because, as Erving Goffman once pointed out to me, the Parisian version of the art of living has never ceased to exert a sort of fascination in the 'Anglo-Saxon' world, even beyond the circle of snobs and socialites, thereby attaining a kind of universality.

The model of the relationships between the universe of economic and social conditions and the universe of life-styles which is put forward here,

based on an endeavour to rethink Max Weber's opposition between class and *Stand,* seems to me to be valid beyond the particular French case and, no doubt, for every stratified society, even if the system of distinctive features which express or reveal economic and social differences (themselves variable in scale and structure) varies considerably from one period, and one society, to another.[2] For example, the slightest familiarity with the structural mode of thought tells one that the use of French words, proper names, preferably noble, or common nouns—Institut de Beauté, Confiseur, Haute couture, etc.—performs the same function for shops on Fifth Avenue or Madison Avenue as English words like hairdresser, shirtmaker or interior designer on shop fronts in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.[3] But, more broadly, the sense of distance, even strangeness, which scientific objectification itself produces and which is intensified by the differences in historical traditions, giving different contents to different realizations of the same structures, must not prevent the reader from reflecting onto his own society, onto his own position within it, in short, onto himself, the analyses he is offered.

That is why, though I am aware of the dangers of a facile search for partial equivalences which cannot stand in for a methodical comparison between systems, I shall take the risk of suggesting, within the limits of my knowledge of American society and culture, some guidelines for a reading that seeks to identify, behind the specific institution of a particular society, the structural invariant and, by the same token, the equivalent institution in another social universe. At the level of the 'international' pole of the dominant class the problem scarcely arises, since the cultural products are (relatively) international. One could replace *Les Temps Modernes* by *Partisan Review,*[4] France-Musique by educational television (Channel 13, WQXR, WGBH etc.) and perhaps ultra-leftism by sixties 'camp',[5] while the *New York Review of Books* would (alas) represent an unlikely combination of the weekly *Nouvel Observateur,* the review *Critique* and, especially in its successive enthusiasms, the journal *Tel Quel.* As regards bourgeois taste, the American professionals, executives and managers might ask of the film, book, art and music critics of the *New York Times* or magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* the same balanced, subtly diversified judgements which their French opposite numbers expect from *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro* or weeklies like *L'Express* or *Le Point.* The titles and authors favoured by the best-seller readership will vary from country to country, but in each case there will be a preponderance of the life-stories and memoirs of exemplary heroes of bourgeois success or 'non-fiction novels'. The undemanding entertainment which Parisians expect from boulevard theatre, New Yorkers will seek in Broadway musicals.

But I believe I have said enough to encourage my readers to join in the game, at least so as to correct my mistakes and perhaps to pursue the search for equivalents, which would have to be sought in song and cinema (Is Brigitte Bardot like Marilyn Monroe? Is Jean Gabin the French John Wayne, or Humphrey Bogart or Spencer Tracy?)—and also in dress, interior decoration, sport and cooking. For it is certain that on each side of the Channel or the Atlantic some things are compatible, others are not; and the preferences of a class or class fraction constitute coherent systems. To support this hypothesis, which all the empirical analyses confirm, I can invoke Edgar Allan Poe, who spells out the link between the most everyday choices, in decoration, for example, and choices in the 'fine arts', seeing in the ordinary arrangement of the wealthy apartments of his country the expression of a way of life and thought: 'We speak of the keeping of a room as we would of the keeping of a picture—for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting, suffice for decision on the adjustment of a chamber.'[6]

In its form, too, this book is 'very French'. This will be understood if the reader accepts that, as I try to show, the mode of expression characteristic of a cultural production always depends on the laws of the market in which it is offered.[7] Although the book transgresses one of the fundamental taboos of the intellectual world, in relating intellectual products and producers to their social conditions of existence—and also, no doubt, *because* it does so—it cannot entirely ignore or defy the laws of academic or intellectual propriety which condemn as barbarous any attempt to treat culture, that present incarnation of the sacred, as an object of science. That is one of the reasons—along with the costs of book production—why I have only very partially reproduced the survey material and the statistical data used, and have not always given the exposition of the method as much prominence as the rhetoric of scientificity would demand. (As in the French edition, some passages of the text, containing detailed statistical material, illustrative examples or discussion of ancillary issues, are printed in small type so that the reader who seeks an overview of the main argument may pass over them on a first reading.) Likewise, the style of the book, whose long, complex sentences may offend—constructed as they are with a view to reconstituting the complexity of the social world in a language capable of holding together the most diverse things while setting them in rigorous perspective—stems partly from the endeavour to mobilize all the resources of the traditional modes of expression, literary, philosophical or scientific, so as to say things that were de facto or de jure excluded from them, and to prevent the reading from slipping back into the simplicities of the smart essay or the political polemic.[8]

Finally, I realize how much the specificity of the French intellectual field may have contributed to the conception of this book, in particular to its perhaps immoderate ambition of giving a scientific answer to the old questions of Kant's critique of judgement, by seeking in the structure of the social classes the basis of the systems of classification which

structure perception of the social world and designate the objects of aesthetic enjoyment. But in an age when the effects of a premature division of labour separate anthropology from sociology, and, within the latter, the sociology of knowledge from the sociology of culture, not to mention the sociology of food or sport, it is perhaps the advantage of a world still haunted by the ultimate and total questionings of the prophetic intellectual that one is led to refuse the self-induced myopia which makes it impossible to observe and understand everything that human practices reveal only when they are seen in their mutual relationships, that is, as a totality.[9]

At all events, there is nothing more universal than the project of objectifying the mental structures associated with the particularity of a social structure. Because it presupposes an epistemological break which is also a social break, a sort of estrangement from the familiar, domestic, native world, the critique (in the Kantian sense) of culture invites each reader, through the 'making strange' beloved of the Russian formalists, to reproduce on his or her own behalf the critical break of which it is the product. For this reason it is perhaps the only rational basis for a truly universal culture.

Distinction

Introduction

You said it, my good knight! There ought to be laws to protect the body of acquired knowledge.

Take one of our good pupils, for example: modest and diligent, from his earliest grammar classes he's kept a little notebook full of phrases.

After hanging on the lips of his teachers for twenty years, he's managed to build up an intellectual stock in trade; doesn't it belong to him as if it were a house, or money?

Paul Claudel, *Le soulier de satin,* Day III, Scene ii

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate. But one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless 'culture', in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into 'culture' in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food.

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin.[1] The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognized and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest—other things being equal—in 'extra-curricular' and avant-garde culture. To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes

tastes to function as markers of 'class'. The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it: the importance attached to manners can be understood once it is seen that it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different—and ranked—modes of culture acquisition, early or late, domestic or scholastic, and the classes of individuals which they characterize (such as 'pedants' and *mondains*). Culture also has its titles of nobility—awarded by the educational system—and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility.

The definition of cultural nobility is the stake in a struggle which has gone on unceasingly, from the seventeenth century to the present day, between groups differing in their ideas of culture and of the legitimate relation to culture and to works of art, and therefore differing in the conditions of acquisition of which these dispositions are the product.[2] Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines, since even within the educational system it devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation as 'scholastic' or even 'pedantic' in favour of direct experience and simple delight.

The logic of what is sometimes called, in typically 'pedantic' language, the 'reading' of a work of art, offers an objective basis for this opposition. Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. Not having learnt to adopt the adequate disposition, he stops short at what Erwin Panofsky calls the 'sensible properties', perceiving a skin as downy or lace-work as delicate, or at the emotional resonances aroused by these properties, referring to 'austere' colours or a 'joyful' melody. He cannot move from the 'primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience' to the 'stratum of secondary meanings', i.e., the 'level of the meaning of what is signified', unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties and which identify the specifically stylistic properties of the

work.[3] Thus the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, *Einfühlung*, which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code.[4]

This typically intellectualist theory of artistic perception directly contradicts the experience of the art-lovers closest to the legitimate definition; acquisition of legitimate culture by insensible familiarization within the family circle tends to favour an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition.[5] The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education. This is true of the mode of artistic perception now accepted as legitimate, that is, the aesthetic disposition, the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated—such as, at one time, primitive arts, or, nowadays, popular photography or kitsch—and natural objects. The 'pure' gaze is a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, that is, a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products.[6] An art which, like all Post-Impressionist painting, is the product of an artistic intention which asserts the primacy of the mode of representation over the object of representation demands categorically an attention to form which previous art only demanded conditionally.

The pure intention of the artist is that of a producer who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product, who tends to reject not only the 'programmes' imposed a priori by scholars and scribes, but also—following the old hierarchy of doing and saying—the interpretations superimposed a posteriori on his work. The production of an 'open work', intrinsically and deliberately polysemic, can thus be understood as the final stage in the conquest of artistic autonomy by poets and, following in their footsteps, by painters, who had long been reliant on writers and their work of 'showing' and 'illustrating'. To assert the autonomy of production is to give primacy to that of which the artist is master, i.e., form, manner, style, rather than the 'subject', the external referent, which involves subordination to functions—even if only the most elementary one, that of representing, signifying, saying something. It also means a refusal to recognize any necessity other than that inscribed in the specific tradition of the artistic discipline in question: the shift from an art which imitates nature to an art which imitates art, deriving from its own history the exclusive source of its experiments and even of its breaks with tradition. An art which ever increasingly contains reference to its own history demands to be perceived historically; it asks to be referred not to an external referent, the represented or designated 'reality', but to the universe of past and present works of art. Like artistic produc-

tion, in that it is generated in a field, aesthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations (*écarts*) which make styles. Like the so-called naive painter who, operating outside the field and its specific traditions, remains external to the history of the art, the 'naive' spectator cannot attain a specific grasp of works of art which only have meaning—or value—in relation to the specific history of an artistic tradition. The aesthetic disposition demanded by the products of a highly autonomous field of production is inseparable from a specific cultural competence. This historical culture functions as a principle of pertinence which enables one to identify, among the elements offered to the gaze, all the distinctive features and only these, by referring them, consciously or unconsciously, to the universe of possible alternatives. This mastery is, for the most part, acquired simply by contact with works of art—that is, through an implicit learning analogous to that which makes it possible to recognize familiar faces without explicit rules or criteria—and it generally remains at a practical level; it is what makes it possible to identify styles, i.e., modes of expression characteristic of a period, a civilization or a school, without having to distinguish clearly, or state explicitly, the features which constitute their originality. Everything seems to suggest that even among professional valuers, the criteria which define the stylistic properties of the 'typical works' on which all their judgements are based usually remain implicit.

The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world, which, given the conditions in which it is performed, is also a social separation. Ortega y Gasset can be believed when he attributes to modern art a systematic refusal of all that is 'human', i.e., generic, common—as opposed to distinctive, or distinguished—namely, the passions, emotions and feelings which 'ordinary' people invest in their 'ordinary' lives. It is as if the 'popular aesthetic' (the quotation marks are there to indicate that this is an aesthetic 'in itself' not 'for itself') were based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function. This is seen clearly in the case of the novel and especially the theatre, where the working-class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters (I am thinking of Brechtian 'alienation' or the disruption of plot in the *nouveau roman*). In contrast to the detachment and disinterestedness which aesthetic theory regards as the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is, i.e., autonomous, *selbständig*, the 'popular aesthetic' ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and 'vulgar' enjoyment, a refusal which is the basis of the taste for formal experiment. And popular judgements of paintings or photographs spring from an 'aesthetic' (in fact it is an ethos) which is the exact opposite of the Kantian aesthetic. Whereas, in order to grasp the specificity of the aesthetic judgement, Kant strove to distinguish that which pleases from that which gratifies and, more generally, to distinguish disinterestedness, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the interest of reason which defines the Good, working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign, and their judgements make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, their appreciation always has an ethical basis.

Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life. The very seriousness (or naivety) which this taste invests in fictions and representations demonstrates a contrario that pure taste performs a suspension of 'naive' involvement which is one dimension of a 'quasi-ludic' relationship with the necessities of the world. Intellectuals could be said to believe in the representation—literature, theatre, painting—more than in the things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe 'naively' in the things represented. The pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world, which may take the form of moral agnosticism (visible when ethical transgression becomes an artistic *parti pris*) or of an aestheticism which presents the aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle and takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit. The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease—that tends to induce an active distance from necessity.

Although art obviously offers the greatest scope to the aesthetic disposition, there is no area of practice in which the aim of purifying, refining and sublimating primary needs and impulses cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life, that is, the primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter, does not produce the same effects. And nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common' (because the 'common' people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration, completely reversing the popular disposition which annexes aesthetics to ethics.

In fact, through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance

and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. And statistical analysis does indeed show that oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition—linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity, which favours the most 'filling' and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty—or luxury—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function.

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. The culture which results from this magical division is sacred. Cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation. Proof enough of this is found in the two following quotations, which might almost have been written for the delight of the sociologist:

'What struck me most is this: nothing could be obscene on the stage of our premier theatre, and the ballerinas of the Opera, even as naked dancers, sylphs, sprites or Bacchae, retain an inviolable purity.'[7]

'There are obscene postures: the stimulated intercourse which offends the eye. Clearly, it is impossible to approve, although the interpolation of such gestures in dance routines does give them a symbolic and aesthetic quality which is absent from the intimate scenes the cinema daily flaunts before its spectators' eyes . . . As for the nude scene, what can one say, except that it is brief and theatrically not very effective? I will not say it is chaste or innocent, for nothing commercial can be so described. Let us say it is not shocking, and that the chief objection is that it serves as a box-office gimmick. . . . In *Hair,* the nakedness fails to be symbolic.'[8]

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.