

aspects of Bourdieu's theorizing. Below, we present a brief overview of a field approach to aesthetics and then offer a rereading of Bourdieu that suggests that his work may provide the basis for an aesthetic approach to social explanation. We then argue that by focusing (as did Bourdieu in *Distinction*) on 'second-order' judgements – judgements of judgements – we may be able to demonstrate the most fundamental ways in which this social aesthetics can point towards a rigorous cultural sociology of action.

Bourdieu and Kant

We assume general familiarity with the approach of Pierre Bourdieu; here we focus on his work *Distinction*, for reasons that we make clear below. *Distinction* was, as Bourdieu subtitled it, a social critique of the judgement of taste, especially 'pure' taste. It is tempting to view Bourdieu's critique of Kantian purity as essentially agonistic rather than theoretically constructive. But Bourdieu's critique was not merely a war of words; his barbed presentation was necessary for us to understand the role of a certain type of judgement in social action. It is not that Bourdieu was attempting to show the 'functions' of pure taste, but rather, to allow us to understand what purity of taste is. Just as the sacred is not made without reference to the profane, but rather is a separation from the profane, so pure taste – and the cultivation of pure taste – is a taste for purity. The pure taste is not a taste that ignores the materiality of the common, but one that flees the common, though it may also involve embracing the common ... when this is an uncommon choice (among a specific group of comparables). In sum, purity is not escape from the world – it is a (dominant) position within the world. For this reason, it can be an avenue to understanding the nature of the world.

Further, taste, whatever its degree of purity, is a disposition to make certain types of judgements regarding certain types of objects that are *already there*. We cannot understand the logic of the taste without understanding the logic that explains the dispersion and organization of the objects it encounters. To take a familiar case as analogy, we all now understand that 'race blind' policies *mean* and therefore *are* one thing in a world in which there is existing racial inequality and another in a world in which there is not. The organization of tastes, and hence of positions taken, could not be independent of the configuration of positions that we call social structure if it wanted to – that is, if the organized tastes wanted to, which means that the tasters wanted to – and they don't. People do not want their tastes to be independent of the rest of social life because those who make judgements make them about that 'rest of'. As we shall see, this is the key to making sense of *Distinction* as a general framework for cultural sociology.

A Bourdieuan cultural sociology of action?

Restricted application

It is not immediately clear that Bourdieu's work really does provide anything like a general theory of action, despite the fact that many adherents have been emboldened to treat it as such. For one thing, the specific set of social processes that interested Bourdieu are a subset of all social processes; further, to the extent that we focus on Bourdieu's theory of fields, it is, as Bourdieu himself would have no trouble acknowledging, necessarily of restricted application because not all action takes place in fields.

Given that there have been critiques of Bourdieu's theory that are based merely on this selective interest (as if focusing on objectively strategic action were to make the strong claim

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A social aesthetics as a general cultural sociology?

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Introduction

A new cultural sociology?

Cultural sociology has often been considered a coherent approach that assumes the central role of culture in a large number of spheres of social life (see especially Alexander 2003). This is in contrast to a more narrowly defined sociology of Culture, which more often focuses on, for instance, the production, distribution, consumption and reception of what are consensually taken to be Cultural products and services, such as paintings, country music performances or haute cuisine. (We use small-c to indicate the broader, anthropological use of the word and big-C to indicate the narrower one.) The dominant understanding of cultural sociology has been one that emphasizes the importance of shared cognitions, most generally 'schema' of different sorts, up to and including shared understandings of the most transcendent values.

From such a perspective, the approach to the sociology of Culture associated with Pierre Bourdieu (especially 1984) has been seen as threatening a materialism and reductionism that would destroy any appreciation of culture as autonomous (hence Alexander's [1995] fierce critique). There is a way in which this interpretation is quite correct: as we shall see, Bourdieu's aesthetic theory mounted a sustained attack on the idea of purity, which he viewed as the greatest impurity of all, and to the extent that the plank of the autonomy of culture is used as a stand-in for such purity, there is indeed an unyielding opposition between the two perspectives.

Yet a coherent elaboration of the field theoretic perspective that Bourdieu put forward, rather than being the negation of cultural sociology, is itself a cultural sociology, a systematic account of the role of culture in a wide variety of social domains. Further, we argue that this general cultural sociology is by its nature an aesthetics – an examination of how actors respond to the qualitative properties of experience. Thus we shall argue that aesthetics, rather than being an approach suitable only to specific areas of high cultural production and consumption, is the most reasonable model for a rigorous science of what we shall call action.¹ This expansive role for aesthetics was a central tenet of the first generation of field theorists, though they influenced Bourdieu only indirectly, and is compatible with the more coherent

that *all* human action is objectively strategic), one might seek to avoid further confusion by emphasizing in what ways Bourdieu's theory is not a general theory of action. Following this tactic, one would emphasize that this approach is at its best when confronted with specific, reasonably well defined, social fields. However, there are paths towards generalization beyond such delimited fields. We want to discuss two here.

The field of power

The first is the path that Bourdieu himself took. We must understand that Bourdieu's empirical work very often analyzed the behavior of actors in well-defined fields of activities, often with clear organizational bases – for example, universities (Bourdieu 1988), art galleries (Bourdieu 1996a) and theaters (Bourdieu 1993). Such organizationally delimited or anchored fields (note that this is not the same thing as an 'organizational field') have two characteristics. First, one's 'position' may have a very clear relation to consensually understood organizational attributes: an appointment in some academic department, a partnership in some firm, a column in some media outlet.² People occupying positions in these fields can know in a very definite sense where they are and where they are with respect to others in the field.

Second, this analytic simplicity can lead us to propose the existence of different kinds of field-specific capital. Such capital is, in essence, a reification of position (which is just what it should be, if we follow Marx – it is a social relation made into a thing subject to appropriation by an individual); an actor, rather than being seen as occupying a particular place in a world endowed with various qualities, can be said to 'possess' a certain quantity of social substance. This simplification is often imposed by social investigators, or may reflect the way that people in a field produce their own theories about its structure. In either case, the notion of multiple specific capitals also suggests the existence of a mechanism for conversion by which, say, economic capital is exchanged for cultural capital.

And this was how Bourdieu moved to take a theory that might seem only applicable to specific fields and give it a greater span. That is, he relied on fixity of positions and identifiability of capital to attempt to situate the fields in an overall organizational topography, constructing what he called the 'field of power' (for a previous use of power as such a generalized intermediary between sectors, see Gerth and Mills 1954: 328).

The perhaps mis-named field of power is less a field and more like, on the one hand, a central train station that allows one to move from one line to another and, on the other hand, a total free-for-all: a field without the rules. Here is Bourdieu (1996b: 264f):

The field of power is a field of forces structurally determined by the state of the relations of power among forms of power, or different forms of capital. It is also, and inseparably, a field of power struggles among the holders of different forms of power, a gaming space in which those agents and institutions possessing enough specific capital (economic or cultural capital in particular) to be able to occupy the dominant positions within their respective fields confront each other using strategies aimed at preserving or transforming these relations of power.

That is, it is like a second round in which the winners of various fields, elites associated with different sectors, strive to determine the exchange rate between their capitals, to determine what is the dominant principle of domination. In the crudest terms, for Bourdieu it tends to come down to the eternal struggle between the eggheads and the meatheads – those with

cultural capital versus those with economic capital (or, most simply, us versus them, our rivals for power ... at least in France, where the eggheads have a fighting chance).

We believe that this formulation was a fundamentally flawed one. First, it took the homologies that might indeed be rather strong in France as if they were inherent to social judgment; second, it ideologically inflated the professoriate's obsession with their being sidelined by economic elites as if it was a major structuring issue of modern societies; third, it somewhat fancifully imagined that through struggle of some sort elites could affect the exchange rates of their capitals (when, as any American sociologist can tell you, the exchange rate of economic for cultural capital remains stable at precisely \$0 per bushel). Fourth, and most important, Bourdieu's conception makes the most sense in a highly structured, indeed, corporatist polity, in which there actually are relatively small and well-defined sets of different elites who interact with one another (hence Bourdieu's 'state nobility'), but it is implausible to use this to account for more fundamental homologies across fields. This is readily apparent when comparing France to politics such as the US (see, for instance, Lamont 1992).

That is, Bourdieu did indeed find many fields to have homologies in which there seemed to be a differentiation between those whose capital was mainly economic and those whose capital was mainly cultural. But does this have anything to do with the struggles among the winners of each field? For although Bourdieu increasingly emphasized the field of power account as crucial for accounting for homologies, there was a simpler, more plausible, and more parsimonious account ... in his own earlier work.

And this is simply that fields are embedded in a social space, and all are in the same social space. Although some fields may recruit disproportionately from some areas of social space, and this *does* lead to interesting possibilities of complexity in terms of the formation of homologies, we can as a first approximation imagine that there will be some tendency to the overall organization of the relation of fields to one another coming from the fact of their non-independent fundaments. Here we wish to return to Bourdieu's key work on such social space (*Distinction*) and suggest that he has here in fact theorized a wide-ranging field of judgment. That is, instead of going 'up' as did Bourdieu to the 'field of power' – to see how the victors in each field divide up the spoils – we go 'down' to see the common substratum in the self-organized relations of all social actors.

Field theory and a theory of fields

First, it may help to make what may initially seem a paradoxical distinction, namely between a 'field theory' and a 'theory of fields'. Field theory is a formal approach to thinking, first developed in physics, and then applied to social psychology by scientists of the Gestalt/phenomenological schools in the mid-twentieth century and resuscitated by Bourdieu in the late twentieth century. A theory of fields is a particular approach to the exploration of the substantive phenomenon of fields; it may or may not have the formal characteristics of a field theory. In fact, the most important such theory currently, that of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), does not rely on field theoretic principles, but rather focuses on common internal structural properties of fields, the relation between fields, the sorts of action that allow actors to successfully navigate or transform fields, and the relations of fields to wider political-economic structures and changes. Such a theory of fields is clearly applicable to the more institutionally defined, 'objectified' fields such as the discrete realms of production that Bourdieu often studied.

But in the field theoretic perspective, a field is a global organization of vectors (pushes and/or pulls in a certain direction) that arises from the local mutual interactions of elements.

Further, we expect such pushes and pulls to be regular aspects of human experience, as the objects that we encounter have valences (good/bad, useful/useless and so on) that we read in with their other perceivable aspects. Thus we can approach a field theoretic understanding by beginning with the nature of aesthetic perception; we here review the conclusions of the Gestalt theorists who made this connection so as to assemble key aspects of the vocabulary we will need.

Field theory and aesthetics

Objects and fields

We will argue that the field theoretic approach of Bourdieu implies a path of generalization that can only be called a social aesthetics. Interestingly, this conclusion was reached by the first generation of social field theorists, who came from the German Gestalt school, all of whom were interested in aesthetics as a way of approaching action. Aesthetics were even more central to second generation theorists such as Metzger (e.g. 1986a; 1986b). There were also Gestalt-/field-theory inspired works of art criticism, most notably Meyer (1956), but also Berleant (1970) and Arnheim (1971). Bourdieu himself was only indirectly influenced by the Gestaltists; though he had some familiarity with the work of Kurt Lewin, it was mainly through Merleau-Ponty, and to a lesser extent Sartre, that these ideas came to Bourdieu (Martin and Gregg, 2015). Rather than deriving it from a close engagement with the Gestalt theorists, Bourdieu developed an emphasis on aesthetic judgement for the same reason that the Gestalt theorists did – it is strongly implied by a field theoretic account.

Aesthetics refers here to the family of theories and vocabularies that help us account for the varied qualitative experience that persons have of objects and experiences, especially those experiences connected with pleasure and displeasure. Thus they are not theories of the sensory receptivity of persons, but about a type of duality, the relationship between the characteristics of objects and the characteristics of experience. Although the term 'aesthetics' comes from the word for *sensation*, aesthetics has always been understood to imply not mere sensation, but *judgement*, and the puzzle of aesthetics is in some ways to account for our capacity to create judgements not through, say, syllogistic reasoning, but rather our reflection upon our own experience (for example, as pleasurable as opposed to displeasurable).

Further, aesthetics rises to the challenge of accounting for experiences that are complex and rich (as opposed to simple and atomic) yet unitary, which requires some way of grasping how complexities may be intuited as unities. Two questions are always asked and must be answered together: What is it about X that makes us feel Y? And what about those tasteless jerks who *don't* feel Y in the presence of X? That is, the intersubjective validity of aesthetic perception allows us to explain our reactions by recourse to the properties of objects even as we recognize, and must account for, the fact that this intersubjective concordance stops far short of unanimity. Indeed, if unanimity did obtain, taste could not provide us with a way of navigating social life.

The Gestalt/field approach holds that, first, whatever it is about X that pleases us (say isn't just about X, but is *in* it, or is it. The qualities of objects – those aspects of them that have the potential to evoke a certain sort of response upon contact with a certain form of sentient being – are as objective as anything else about them. The fact that this vinyl disk recording of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* will make grown men burst into tears is no different from the fact that the disk will fly 20 yards if you throw it like a Frisbee. But just like the disk will only

fly if it is thrown in the proper atmosphere, so too its lachrymogenic quality is only realized when it is brought into contact with the person of a certain disposition.

What prevents this from being a tautology (this will make you cry, except if it doesn't) is that the sets of dispositions to objects are non-randomly distributed across persons, and associated with social position. Hence any aesthetics is, for a sociologist, only stabilized by becoming a sociological aesthetics (this is similar to the 'institutional' aesthetics of art theory, as implicitly adopted by Becker 1982: 145). A social aesthetics, then, does not refer to those occasions when we choose our analytical tools on the basis of their aesthetic qualities, nor when we make inquiries about experiences that would widely be understood as involving high culture (asking, say, whether the way in which men hear the Mahler songs is similar to how women hear them); instead, it refers to our use of these analytic tools outside of the straitened realm of high culture to see how our grown man reads *USA Today*, thinks about the Methodist Episcopal Church, talks about Harvard University or answers a feeling-thermometer question on 'how close do you feel to immigrants'. It is not that specifically 'aesthetic' qualities are invoked (thus not that he thinks the stained glass windows are pretty, or that immigrants are somewhat too stubby compared to classic Greek statuary). Rather, it is that we as analysts must be oriented to the same problem in everyday social life that aestheticians grapple with when attempting to account for the experience of artworks: how to study the processes whereby persons, presumably simultaneously, (1) create single virtual unities out of complex tangles that our intellect would classify as abstractions and (2) retrieve information about the qualities of these unities, information that has a veridical nature in that it allows actors to successfully orient themselves to action in concordance, complementarity or contradiction with others.

The stuff of culture

We pursue such an aesthetics by following the lines laid out by the Gestalt theorists. For them, obviously aesthetic experience was only the tip of the iceberg of our capacity for the veridical perception of the qualities of objects. The aspects of objects that were of greatest interest to the Gestalt theorists, and to a theory of action, are their 'affordances' – what we can do with them. For the Gestalt theorists, we can directly perceive that a hammer is something you grab with your hand and smack things with; that a fruit should be eaten; that a rock can be thrown. What is key is that, argued Gibson (1986), information about what objects 'afford' us is present in the 'ambient optic array' – all the reflected, organized, light flying about us. That's why we have eyes.

As a result, the first-approximation account that they derived was one in which persons are fundamentally reactive, a view which may cut against the presumptions of most sociologists. Yet it is, for that, correct – as a first approximation. Objects *do* call out for us to do things with them. The cup says 'pick me up by the handle' and 'drink me'. The problem is that someone who always obeys when a cup says 'drink me' is likely to spend a lot of time very drunk. We generally have the capacity to suppress motor responses to objects with affordances, although when distracted, our suppression may weaken (thus we may find ourselves picking up potato chips that positively scream out 'eat me' when we are talking, completely unaware that we are obeying the chip). Further, certain neurological disorders seem to weaken our central control over, say, our hands, which then respond to the affordances directly (McBride *et al.* 2013; also see Lhermitte 1986), while in other cases, distracted attention may render us insensible to otherwise obvious stimuli (Mack and Rock 1998).

Further, we recognize that there is not only individual variation in what the affordances of objects mean (to one, a photograph is charming, and to another, maudlin), but variation in the degree to which people are responsive to objects. If this latter degree varies according to socially recognizable predictors, this suggests a further role for a sociological analysis, but we lay that to the side for now. Instead, we focus on what is perhaps the simplest issue, namely the nature of the aesthetic response. We can dispense with definitions and typologies because, according to consistent field theoretic principles, as analysts, we do not need to determine the order or arrangement of objects, in the way that a typologizer decides to order unruly particulars. Instead, objects come to us already arranged. That is, consider physical objects. They are, each and every one, in one place at one time, though some (such as train cars) move around a bit. If they radiate information about their affordances, we do not need to begin by *theorizing* where they are, but merely *noting* where they are.

When it comes to social objects, the same should also be true: as the social world has its own principles of organization, we may dispense with typologizing and classifying and proceed to mapping social objects. We may not know precisely where they are, but assuming that they are *somewhere* means that we can use their interactions with persons to tell us where they are. If Arizonans can see Humphrey's Peak, the mountain is probably in Arizona. If public school teachers like mountain climbing (as they do, or at least did, in 1970s France [Bourdieu 1984: 219]), 'mountain climbing' is probably near them, whatever that may mean. Hence the duality-based technique of correspondence analysis that became the workhorse for Bourdieu's numerical explorations (Breiger 2000).

But this has a strong implication. If we are materialists, as most of us claim to be (not in the Marxist sense but simply that we think that anything that exists is either matter or energy), then anything that we study is somewhere in the world as organized stuff. The problem for us is not locating the stuff, but understanding its principles of organization. The implication is that actors are our co-researchers. If we have spilled sugar and are not sure where it is, a fine solution would be to release a number of ants. The ants will quickly trace out the constellation of the sugar distribution.³

Similarly, people are continually telling us about social structure, if we would only listen. They tell us how classes are organized by whom they visit (Bian *et al.* 2005) and most importantly, by whom they marry. We, however, tend to refuse to allow them to explain the class structure to us, and instead keep our preconceptions and find an 'imperfect association', say, of marriage patterns – given the assumed perfection of our lousy measures. In other words, it is not that culture is an 'also' to 'structure,' nor that culture 'is often important' in 'causing' or 'reproducing' structure. It is that our best tools for the investigation of social structure involve understanding those sorts of trans-individual regularities in the distribution of subjective states that we consider culture.

In sum, our capacity for non-arbitrary intuition of the qualities of complex social objects gives us, as actors, a head start in interpreting the world, and, as analysts, a head start in interpreting action, which itself is a function of compiled interpretations of a world full of stuff. Because social objects which make up one portion of this stuff, are not always visible to analysts as unities the way they are to actors, we are unlikely to be able to understand action without piggybacking on the capacity of actors to have insight – a capacity to use superficial aspects of the world to orient oneself to things one cannot technically perceive. Thus a field theoretic account joins those who would call for a vigorous cultural sociology. The great difference, however, is that the organization is believed to be in the arrangement of the stuff of the world, the pattern of social relations, and not a shared set of complex cognitive templates.

But how do we move from such a general picture to a clearer understanding of the role of such cultural components in *action*? This returns us to the issue of judgement in *Distinction*.

The field of judgements

Judgement and social space

Distinction stands out from Bourdieu's other works in two notable ways. First, it is regularly understood to be about cultural consumption, while his other books are generally oriented toward social production and reproduction. More important for our purposes, *Distinction* makes routine use of the language of fields for specific realms of endeavour or classes of products among which choices can be made (1984: 224, 226), but organizes these using the idea of a 'space' of various lifestyle choices. The term 'space' suggests a 'neutral,' or uncharged, substrate in which various sorts of fields may be positioned, in the same way that Cartesian space could be used to identify a metric field (e.g. a magnetic one) but would not itself have any field-like properties. Bourdieu tended to rely on space metaphors when he was speaking more generally, descriptively and regarding shared fundaments for multiple fields. This would suggest a strict division, in which only the intersubjectively recognized arenas of organized striving are amenable to field analysis, which may map these positions onto locations in space.

And that is how most Bourdieusians have treated his approach. Yet at the same time as he uses space for such more general principles of structuration, Bourdieu also (1984: 230) speaks of a 'field' of social classes in which tastes can be produced in strict analogy to the production of things-for-which-we-have tastes, which suggests that the social space of lifestyle choices is itself this field – even though this clearly is not one of the 'objectified' fields that we saw being treatable by a 'theory of fields'. For this reason, we would be unlikely to propose a 'theory of fields' for something like the set of judgements that are key for *Distinction*. Indeed, the Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 3, 9) approach defines the fields in question as 'mesolevel' orders 'in which actors ... interact with one another on the basis of shared ... understandings about the purposes of the field'. Most would, however, deny that there are *any* such purposes in the sorts of consumptive practices that seem to be the focus of *Distinction*, and certainly not claim that there is *agreement* about them.

But it is not the consumption itself that is of interest to Bourdieu; this is in many ways a by-product of the more fundamental *judgements* involved. It was, we recall, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* that inspired Bourdieu's theoretical investigations, and he pursued the dynamics involved doggedly: subjects are invited by researchers to judge various objects; the quantitative analyses here (and in many works inspired by *Distinction*) turn on large-scale observed correlations that lump together similar persons and things. Bourdieu links these judgements – and the general principles underlying them – to position in social space (most famously, linking binary oppositions like 'sweet/dry' to class oppositions like 'working class/middle class').

Given that these judgements are of all sorts of things – foods, sports, music and so on – it would seem quite clear that we cannot propose that there is some single 'field' in which they all sit, because they are judging a completely heterogeneous set of objects. But that may be incorrect: the subjects spend a great deal of time judging the judgement of others, regularly characterizing their sense of their own position by reference to the positions occupied by others (for examples: Bourdieu 1984: 185, 258, 275, 294, 298–300, 323, 324, 326, 335, 349, 355).

This pervasive judging of other judgements leads to a kind of comparability across domains and suggests that it might not be at all implausible to gather and analyze these judgements together.

Second order judgements

There are two notable characteristics of this sort of field which we think make it of key analytic importance for a general cultural sociology. As we noted above, it is clear that here, unlike the fields of production that Bourdieu analyzes, there are no 'stakes' to wager, no 'capital' to increase. Of course, there may well be *some* people who pursue distinction as if there were an apex that could be reached (our post-post-post-post-modern types, say), but we know from *Distinction* that this is not true of all. Many play this game 'as losers', attempting to distinguish themselves from others by knowing their place and loving their fate.⁴ And yet, we find that field theoretic principles seem completely applicable.

The second characteristic is that while the objects of first order judgements are various and quite possibly often incomparable, second order judgements (judgements of judgements) are more homogeneous. Further, we believe that the potential for recursion in such judgements is greatly limited. That is, logical considerations alone might lead us to think that we would need to distinguish

1. Objects (say, a garden gnome);
2. Judgements of objects (garden gnomes are tacky);
3. Judgements of judgements of objects (those who think 'garden gnomes are tacky' are intolerant);
4. Judgements of judgements of judgements of objects (those who think 'those who think "garden gnomes are tacky" are intolerant' are simply uncultured);
5. Judgements of judgements of judgements of judgements of objects (those who think 'those who think "those who think "garden gnomes are tacky" are intolerant" are simply uncultured' are full of themselves).

And so on, *ad astra*. Yet we believe that this is not the case. It may well be that there can be some separation to different levels of judgement: indeed, there is some evidence for this in *Distinction* (1984: 300), precisely where one middle-class person seems to judge that gnomes are tacky but that those who judge others harshly for accepting low culture are doing something wrong (that is, he is aware of the 'racism' of such judgements, though he himself makes them). But it would seem to be limited to only a few levels and a few situations. Certainly, the hypothetical attempt to provide an example above in which these levels could be separated led not merely to alternation of valence (+, -, +, -, ...), but to alteration – otherwise unlimited recursion seems to require either multiple personality disorder or a cognitive capacity that dwarfs anything plausibly attributed to persons.⁵ Indeed, we might say that without alteration, it might be impossible to separate many levels, because *approving* judgements of judgement are 'transparent' (in the way that, contra Hume, we do not need to judge that our own judgements are true). Thus we expect judgements of judgements of judgements to regularly collapse back to judgements of judgements, and so we will be able to speak simply of 'first-order' judgements (judgements of objects) and 'second-order' judgements (judgements of judgements).

Finally, we should note that judging judgements is clearly a perfect case of that sort of valenced perception that can lead to vectoral experience (as each positive judgement is

a 'towards' and each negative an 'away' from the target). Thus there is a way in which the very existence of second-order judgements suggests the possibility of a general field approach to at least one aspect of culture.

How can judgements form a field?

It is for this reason, we believe, that in *Distinction* Bourdieu moves effortlessly from the discussion of this social space to the theoretical principles that require the identification of a field (e.g. 110). Field theoretic analyses are applicable for the set of second-order judgements, not only because these are vectorial, but because they have a non-random organization that is accessible to actors' experience.

It is, we recall, the suggestion of Gestalt and field theories that objects in the world afford us certain felt imperatives about their use. The organization of these objects is social in two ways: first, in any literal sense, the ways in which objects are spatio-temporally distributed, and in which access to them is distributed across persons, is the result of at least partially non-random social processes. Whether it is the placement of a Monet next to a Renoir in a room in a museum or the very placement of the museum, its distance to forms of transport, its hours and admissions policies, we are seeing the results of some of the myriad social processes structuring the organization of things in the world. Second, if Bourdieu was in the slightest bit correct about anything, the *responses* that people have to such objects are differential in a way that is, as a first approximation, a function of position in social space.

At this point, we must introduce what we think is an underappreciated aspect of Bourdieu's analysis of social space. Let us call the 'lemma of the environmental validity of social space' the assumption that the principles used to organize individuals by the analyst are shared by the analyzed. They may not be the only, or even the most important, such principles, but they are recognized by actors, and hence, to an empirically assessable degree, structure patterns of interaction.

The logic above suggests that the task for a cultural sociology is to provide a framework that allows us to understand how human interactions produce affordances that enable actors to orient themselves toward one another in much the same way they orient themselves to other things in the world. It is not logically necessary, but clearly convenient and plausible, that we can use social space as an analogue for geographical space when we attempt to examine how actors respond to the affordances in their environment.

It might seem difficult to go from the analyses of *Distinction* showing class preferences for certain cultural products to more important actions, paradigmatically, to the analysis of class formation itself. But to the extent that people present themselves to one another as bundles of judgements, actors can perceive the affordances of one to another. That is, the transition from first-order to second-order judgements may be what transforms a sociology of Culture into a cultural sociology.

Perception, judgement and action

A sociology of perception

What is somewhat unusual about the field theoretic approach is the direct mapping of the qualities of objects to the actions of those who confront them. Conditional on the actor's own structure (*habitus*), the object tells the actor what to do with it. Just as potato chips say 'eat me', so a garden gnome says to some, 'buy me' and to others, 'mock me'. This means that the

field theoretic approach unites its theory of action with a particular (and we think particularly defensible) sociology of perception.

And here we believe a cultural sociology based on these aesthetic principles makes a contribution to recent efforts at reformulating a sociology of perception (Friedman 2011) and/or copresence (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013). Most sociologies of perception assume that the bulk of the organization of experience comes 'post-retina', as we pass neutral sensations (one can hardly call them perceptions) through what we may call a 'Mary-Douglas-Filter' of culturally prescribed samenesses and differences. Despite this position's compatibility with core ways of thinking in sociology (see Martin 2011), this seems to require implausibly demanding processing on the part of the individual mind, in contrast to theories – like that of Bourdieu – that argue that our chunking of experience comes not via the imposition of culturally arbitrary templates but because we learn to *recognize* (and *misrecognize*) the sorts of things that are out there.⁶

What might seem at best overscrupulous concern and at worst, irrelevant navel-gazing, may be crucial for our understanding of *social* perception – how we perceive others perceiving us. The puzzle is, as Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013: 169) have emphasized, that we find situations in which actors experience a kind of immediacy and an illusion of co-presence even though they are actually communicating via very restricted channels (such as email), with impoverished interactants like animals (Jerolmack 2009), with non-living actants (for example, a simple program like ELIZA or with a doll [also see Cerulo 2009]), or even with entities believed by many sociologists to be wholly imaginary (Sharp 2010).

In no way should we ignore such strong results about the *imputation* processes that are involved in actors' reflections on their relations with others, which indeed may also affect their actions.⁷ Further, we must understand that, as Goffman (1967: 135) put it, the 'illusion of reality' – that firm belief that we are all living in the same world – owes its existence to processes that are fragile, though susceptible to quick repair. But we do not need to choose between (on the one hand) theories that flatten all forms of orientation to the world into a single voluntaristic attribution ('if you want to think people are giraffes, well then, I guess they're giraffes to you') and theories that require that no one ever make a mistake ('we see things as they are, all the time'). Ecological psychologists like Gibson (1986) instead begin from the premise that *when* we perceive, we perceive the qualities of things (which is to say, their potentials for our experience and our action), and when we misperceive, it is such qualities that we misperceive.

So, too, we propose that a theory of social perception must start with situations of perceivability. By focusing on *attributions* of co-presence, and attempting to experimentally manipulate these, we often miss what is essential about true social co-presence, which is mutual exposedness. The person – or javascript program – on the other end of a chat line not only has a very narrow channel of communication (a single stream of ASCII characters, say), but is almost completely cloaked, with indefinite amounts of time before any information (save that a move has not yet been made) is given off.

It is for this reason, we suspect, that research along these lines has produced contradictory findings: some arguing that reduced co-presence leads to *exaggerated* social judgements (in part because of the lack of mediating non-verbal signals [Menchik and Tian 2008]), while in other cases it seems that it is high co-presence ('vividness') that produces exaggerated judgement (see Campos-Castillo and Hitlin [2013: 185] who endorse this position). But seeing co-presence as a 'treatment' that can be applied in various 'doses' (which can have 'effects') may be the wrong way of beginning; rather, we should think about *environments* that make certain forms of exposure and concealment possible.

Perception out and about

And it is this that returns us to the idea of a field. A field (the French *champ* comes from the Latin *campus*) is, at heart, an open space facilitating certain types of human actions, most importantly, cultivation and conflict.⁸ And field theory is a theory that best works for situations in which people are in 'cleared land' – exposed to mutual observation, and hence primed for mutual orientation. It is not impossible that results from laboratory experiments using close-up, heavily constrained vision will tell us *something* about social perception in a field, but it is unlikely that the results can be mechanically applied, without adaptation, to action outside. As an analogy, we are able to track a limited number of distinct moving objects in our visual field at any time, but the way that we perceive the texture of a grassy plain, say, is not a compounding of such individual objects. First, it seems that (despite our attribution of distinctness to 'parts') we do not actually see the detail for any part of the grass except the most central elements (which reach the fovea), and instead 'fill in' the texture for other areas. But most important, as Gibson emphasized, we use the *vector field* that is created by movement across a texture to tell us where we are, which way we are headed and what we are likely to hit. The organization of the texture, the preservation of the principles of organization in the optic array, and the development of our sensory-motor system in a world with such principles of organization allow us to make extremely efficient inferences that we could not do deliberately.

The upshot of this side-trip into analogy is the following conclusion: we may need to begin a social theory of perception with a field perspective not because we happen to like field theory, but because the 'openness' of fields leads them to elicit broadly consensual views of reality for the actors within them. We can thereby dispense with overly scrupulous attention to attribution, and, without denying that there are always errors, determine why social judgement works for action as well as it does.

There is a second implication. Given the 'lemma of the environmental validity of social space' above – one which we believe no sociologist would deny – we can trust that we can 'hang' judgements on social space, but *not* simply for our analytic purposes, the way we might regress counts of hen pecks on certain aspects of their social situation. Rather, we are making the claim that *actors* make a similar 'hanging' which means that they *experience the judgements of others as socially organized*. Given that we have already concluded that judgements of judgements are, substantially, judgements, we understand that, first, they are immediate responses to the qualities of that which is judged (though we recognize that these qualities, being relations between perceiver and perceived, vary predictably across social space), which allows us to focus on what actors *do* – how they respond to objects and judgements – and not how they may be forced to defend these to interlocutors, whether hostile or friendly, lay or professional.⁹

Advantages of a focus on judgements

In addition to the contributions made to a sociology of perception, we believe that such a general cultural sociology founded on the field of judgements has two other advantages. For one, somewhat counterintuitively, we may find that a more emically adequate approach to cognition, one that begins with first person, qualitative experience, allows us to dispense with the individual as unit of analysis. This in turn might allow us to produce strong theoretical statements about social perception and its relation to action *without* handling the complex, and potentially intractable, problems of a complete sociology of perception. We may get analytic

clarity whenever we reduce the number of elements, but especially so when our subjects and direct objects in a theory of action are properly consubstantial – that is, they are the same sort of thing. Philosophers always had a hard time explaining how mind could know matter, but a very easy one explaining how mind could know mind (as long as the relation was unmediated by matter). Somewhat similarly, if we accept Bourdieu's argument that we judge objects through embodied dispositional principles, then to the extent that sexual fields are bodies judging bodies, they may have this analytic flatness that allows for the development of a parsimonious theoretical vocabulary (Martin 2013; also see Green 2011).

James Coleman (1990: 8) famously argued that every 'macroscopic' social relationship (say, between two variables in a social configuration, M1 and M2) was only a rough proxy that needed to be re-cast as three relations: first, one from the seeming macroproperty to the actual microcomponents of individual characteristics and actions (M1→m1; imagine a 'down arrow'); second, a rigorous and plausible connection from these microelements to others (m1→m2, 'across'); and third, an understanding of how these resultant microelements aggregate to the observed macrocomponent (m2→M2; 'up'). Thus the relation between Protestantism (M1) and capitalism (M2) discussed by Weber must be expanded to include the m1 of individual values and the m2 of individual economic behaviors. Analogously, many accounts of social action that accept the importance of subjective phenomenology seem to be drawn to a similar 'down-over-up' path (↘↗) in which we must go into the subjectivity of the actor, disassemble it into recognizable components (such as 'schemata,' 'values,' 'heuristics' or 'tools'), link these in some way (often undertheorized), and then return up to the level of the actor. To the extent that we focus on second-order judgements, we may be able to take a 'high road' in which we directly link judgement to judgement, avoiding the necessity of opening up heads.

Second, focusing on second-order judgements can help correct possibly misleading conclusions that sociologists have derived from sociological studies of judgement. If only for reasons of tractability, studies have tended to focus on *asymmetric* processes: some are judges, rankers or evaluators, and others are the judged, the ranked and the evaluated. But as Lamont (2012) in particular has argued, one of the most important forms of evaluative practice is peer-evaluation, in which all judges may be judged.

The sociology of judgements (quite understandably and correctly) tends to attempt to re-politicize decisions that are effectively de-politicized. To make an algorithm that automatically ranks colleges (Espeland and Sauder 2007) is to seemingly de-politicize a choice in which power will be used to authoritatively determine allocations (on this dynamic see also Porter 1996). Sociologists (e.g. Boltanski 2011 [2009]) often attempt not only to unveil the precise mechanisms and machinations behind the stabilization of any particular set of criteria but (perhaps especially after their institutions go down a notch in the US News!) also to return these decisions to rough-and-tumble world of politics, where the rated can fight back.

We may perhaps be seeing more of this sort of rough and tumble, given that formal means for evaluating the evaluations of others are increasingly common. At Amazon, rankers are ranked, and even more, in many venues, we find that we are allowed to choose our rankers (people who liked the things you liked like this ...). Such dynamics may be required for the emergence of an orderliness that is clearly distinguishable from patterns of judgement that may be fundamentally arbitrary, or at least may be effectively *made to be* arbitrary by a sociological critique.¹⁰

Our argument is not that this sort of 'judgement 2.0' is now more widespread than '1.0', which would probably be impossible to determine and theoretically irrelevant anyway.

It is that such settings provide a better case for getting at the fundamental dynamics of judgement than one in which the judgement is channeled by, or attached to, exogenously defined structures that define asymmetry. That is, the characteristics of emergent order shed the most light on the nature of the elements involved when these elements swim freely in an otherwise unstructured soup. Moreover, as a descriptive matter, many evaluative practices that have been treated as asymmetric are, to a large extent, the products of group evaluative efforts in which judges devote a great deal of attention to their fellow judges and orient their actions accordingly. Thus Lamont (2009) and Huutoniemi (2012) describe the production of academic consensus by the orientation of evaluators to the judgements of *other* evaluators, rather than toward the object being judged.¹¹

Finally, we note that focusing on *judgements* as opposed to either *actors* or *objects* can lead to greater clarity. Taking the former, it may well be that there are classes of judgements that share formal similarities – for example, 'sour grapes' type judgements (where the inaccessible is judged to be of low quality), or 'dismissive' type judgements, in which something unknown is assumed to be unworthy of being known. We will – solely for purposes of explication and contrary to a great deal of good data – assume a simple world of completely hierarchically ranked positions, here only three: $A > B > C$. These positions can 'contain' both objects and persons, which we denote O_A, O_B, O_C , and P_A, P_B, P_C , respectively; we will use $>$, $<$ and $=$ to denote relations between objects and persons; thus $P_A > O_B, P_C < O_A, P_B = O_B$. We will assume that any P_i makes a "sour grapes" judgement of O_j ($J_i(O_j) = S$) if $P_i < O_j$; makes a "dismissive" judgement of O_j ($J_i(O_j) = D$) if $P_i > O_j$; and makes an "approving" judgement of O_j ($J_i(O_j) = A$) if $P_i = O_j$. We might find regularities in judgements of judgements such that (to take i 's judgement of j 's approval) $J_i(A_j) = A$ if $P_i = P_j$; $= C$ if $P_i < P_j$ (C being a cynical skepticism); and $= P$ if $P_i > P_j$ (P being a supercilious patronizing acceptance). And similarly for other combinations (for example, P_B may judge P_A 's dismissal of O_B as "snobbery," while joining in P_A 's dismissal of O_C). If now we generalize to multiple 'worlds' of objects, in which the ordering of our persons is permuted (one may be an expert on wines but all thumbs when it comes to the viola), we may find the regularities to be preserved at the level of second order judgements and not judgements of persons.

Further, we may find that to the extent that persons do judge one another, they may be more moved by others' *style* of judgement than the content of the judgements themselves (certainly a point made by Bourdieu regarding the aesthetic abstraction and formalism of pure taste). In particular, middle-class persons may approve of judgements of objects that involve prolixity and reference, even if they do not approve of the particular references made. Conversely, the nearly instinctive dismissal response that characterizes the contrarian distinction strategy overflows into dismissals of dismissals (even if these are of objects that are mutually dismissed). And judging the form of judgements allows persons to move into mutual orientation when they do not actually have joint familiarity with enough concrete objects.¹²

We wish to take care not to assert that this approach is simply or directly suitable to all problems. Field theory cannot explain social phenomena that are not organized by a field. Fields that are generally organized by routine behavior may nonetheless still produce phenomena that require deliberate, conscious thought (Leschziner and Green 2013). And as Fligstein and McAdam (2012) would say, we must expect a form of 'rolling turbulence' to scatter our nicely arranged vectors time and time again. Nor does social action oriented toward the perceived judgements of others necessarily mean that actors fully understand one another. Error and misunderstanding are common and sociologically interesting aspects of interaction (see e.g. Gibson 2012). In addition, certain fields may be based entirely on

systematic misapprehension (Bourdieu *et al.* 1994). Our sense of the judgements of others is necessarily incomplete and yet it may amount to much of what we have to go on.

Conclusion

Cultural sociology has concerned itself with the role of culture, broadly defined, in many domains of social life. This perspective has been resistant to Bourdieu's critique of the pre-sumptions underlying taste, and the general view of the sociology of Culture has been that this critique is properly confined to cases of the production and evaluation of a relatively small class of goods. However, the extension of this Bourdieuan sociology of Culture approach to second-order judgements may provide the basis for a cultural sociology in the broader sense. The aesthetic view is ultimately an account of socially conditioned perception. Such distinguishing, judging perceptions may play a significant role not only in the evaluation of a few high status objects, but also in providing a basis for social action with respect to other judging, perceiving actors. The range of phenomena over which this perspective may be especially helpful is still being defined. However, it is immediately useful in lending greater theoretical coherence to our notions of culture. One thing that it seems almost all of us now accept is that there is no express train from social structure to social action that does not pass through perception. But the reasoning outlined here suggests that there are routes that do not pass through quasi-propositional or schematic aspects of cognition. Action informed by perception, rather than complex scripts and schemes, enables us to understand culture as made of the things of the world, rather than a world crammed inside our heads.

Notes

- 1 We understand the reasons why some have abandoned the term in favour of 'practice', but we think we lose more than we gain in throwing out this somewhat turbid bathwater.
- 2 These positions, at least in the case of France, also have clear locations in geographic space: Paris or the provinces, the Left Bank or the Right.
- 3 The only problem is, now we've got an.
- 4 A great deal of work following Peterson (1992) and Bryson (1996) has treated this reference to other positions as a symbolic tactic of identity construction (or autoproduction). Whether or not such an approach incorrectly reduces low-status consumers to a passive null category (see Bennett 2011) seems an empirical question that requires greater precision in our investigations (along the lines of Lizardo and Skiles 2012).
- 5 Although speakers can easily have two levels of recursion, linguists (e.g. Johansson 2005: 238) suggest that our maximum is three or four, and this is with the substantial scaffolding of a linear grammar (which gives us a single dimension to spread out structure on, in contrast to the '0-dimensional' point of unspoken consciousness).
- 6 We must bear in mind, however, that not all such 'things' – social objects, that is, or nexi of relations – that are 'out there' are things we all want to defend as real. Thus entire classes of things, or so Bourdieu claimed, are only recognized because they are misrecognized (for example, the shiftiness of gypsies), hence our temptation to put them consistently in 'scare quotes'.
- 7 We do note that it is not obviously the case that such attributions track behaviour. We may believe that we are 'copresent' and 'fully interacting' with some X (who, say, is actually not present) when our behaviour is actually measurably different than it is with an 'actually copresent' alter. Thomas's rule – that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequence' – is an important place to start, but it is not always correct, and becomes less and less correct as we get to finer grained analyses of behavior.
- 8 Interestingly, it may well be that the root of the Latin *campus* is an Indo-European term meaning *corner* or *bend*, as the first fields were surrounded by non-cleared land; the English and Germanic terms more obviously derive from a root meaning 'flat' or 'spread out'.

9 Much has been made about the difference between the kinds of behavior and explanation elicited by observation and interviewing (Vaisey 2009; Pugh 2013; Khan and Jerolmack 2013); while this remains an open question, it may well be that such techniques will be important for bringing to the fore gaps or contradictions in actors' self-understandings, as well as possible paths of resolution they might pursue in certain circumstances.

10 Thus for example, Rivera (2010; also see 2012) describes the gatekeeping practices at an elite club, noting that the gatekeepers make their decisions about admittance not so much by calculation as a felt sense of the appropriateness of a potential patron. They might have completely indefensible criteria, but until there is pushback, this is not known. It is precisely for this reason that there is such a temptation for asymmetric rankers to cover up the details of their procedures.

11 Clayman and Reisner (1998) characterize a similar process in evaluations of newsworthiness and Radway (1997) in evaluations of books.

12 At the same time, we note that there is reason to think that if our goal is to group persons, we may do better when we *ignore* judgements entirely and simply focus on behavior. The Netflix recommendation algorithm was improved when it was reformulated to take into account not only how viewers had *rated* movies, but the mere fact that they had viewed them at *all*. Thus focusing on the objects tells us what *worlds* people are in, in the sense of forming subgroups of persons who *can* be mutually oriented to one another, and thus induce field effects.

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Genre

Relational approaches to the sociology of music¹

Jennifer C. Lena

A core objective for sociologists of culture has been to understand classification and categorization processes. Categorizing the observed world into groups of things with some perceived similarities is fundamental to human cultures and provides sociologists with insights into how particular social groups define difference and similarity, value and significance. Categorization reflects social structures, as generations of cultural anthropologists and sociologists have demonstrated.

The study of *sociocultural* classification has a long history in sociology, perhaps because category distinctions are often the nucleus for identities, hierarchies, and conflict. Sociologists have examined classification systems in diverse contexts, including organizational forms and religious communities and exploring distinctions between people based on gender, sexuality, race, and cultural tastes, among others. The transmutation of relational qualities, like poverty (which is a social relationship and not a quantity of money), into attributional qualities is a core concern of sociologists working in many areas of the discipline, but the study of how categories "totalize" identities that are in fact often multidimensional and contradictory' (Emirbayer 1997: 308–9) is work that often falls to cultural sociologists.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to the classification of musical works into genres, illuminating some problems that result from the use of musicological categories in sociological research. I propose that we substitute a sociological specification of genre built from the careful study of how relations within music communities constitute categories of consumption. I discuss the consequences of sociological genres for two bodies of research on taste: that of the heritability of preferences and of the theorized 'omnivorousness' of elites. In tracing the roots and uses of a relational approach both in and outside of cultural sociology, I hope to illustrate both a method and a theory of use in the field.

Genre

No ordering principle is as fundamental to culture as genre. Genres are generally treated as natural objects; contested, yes, but based on the sorting of 'intrinsic' or 'objective' attributes like beats-per-minute, or narrative tropes, that link individual works. Our peers in the humanities often employ the idea of genre to focus attention to the text abstracted from the

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The omnivore debate

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