

# Introduction

## Bourdieu on Media and Film

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At the turn of the millennium, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology was memorably described as 'the most powerful social theorization currently available' (Fowler 2000: 2). In the intervening years, developments in cultural production, and above all in digital media, may lead us to revisit the value of Bourdieu's thought as applicable to such production. Moreover, given that film and media are fields to which Bourdieu devoted relatively little space in his work on culture as social practice (writing much more extensively on literature, theatre and painting, for example), what does Bourdieu offer film and media studies in a visually saturated culture? It is in order to answer that question that this book has been conceived. Based on a symposium held at Newcastle University's Research Centre in Film and Digital Media in late 2012, this collection brings together work by researchers from the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe. Our contributors come from diverse disciplines: from sociology, film studies, media studies and communication sciences. We are all however convinced that Bourdieu's work has valuable uses for current research in film and media, as our various case studies aim to show.

Of course, as many observers have noted, with the exception of the short book *On Television*, Bourdieu wrote very little on screen cultures. Indeed, as regards television, 'Bourdieu's lack of research on this topic was all the more puzzling in view of the "social centrality" of television worldwide' (Marlière 2000: 208). We can expand this observation to point out that Bourdieu's interventions on cinema were even rarer – and mainly

limited to comments on perceived threats to an auteurist conception of the medium, as an autonomous field in danger of losing its independence from the market (see below). To a degree this is no surprise, since ‘The conflict of “pure” versus “market” can be seen in every field’ (Bourdieu 1998a: 53). But given the current ‘social centrality’ of visual cultures ranging from film and television to new media, one might wish for a more in-depth analysis of the struggles and stakes in such fields, and a more nuanced view of the imbrications between art and commerce in their ongoing development. If Bourdieu failed to give such a thorough account, the present collection attempts to do so, with case studies including photography – Bourdieu’s own – cinema, television, advertising, the Internet and social media. Our approach, while remaining aware of what Bridget Fowler calls the ‘blind spots’ of Bourdieu’s theorisations of culture (see Chapter One), is to make use of the plentiful ‘illumination’ provided by his work, particularly what he tells us about the ‘space of possibles’ in diverse cultural fields.

One of the most fruitful extensions of Bourdieu’s work on cultural fields concerns subcultures. Derived from Bourdieu’s exploration of cultural capital, the term ‘subcultural capital’ was first coined by Sarah Thornton in her research on dance music and rave cultures (Thornton 1995). More recently it has been applied to cult films (Jancovich 2002), before being helpfully revisited in Bourdieuan terms (Jensen 2006), and again reformulated to investigate the diverse ways in which cult cinema is currently constructed (Hills 2015). Jensen in particular has critiqued Thornton for not being sufficiently aware of the hierarchical distinctions that inform and frame subcultures. He seeks to demonstrate ‘the relative autonomy of subcultures’ (in this case, Danish hip-hop cultures) ‘without defocusing social structure’ (Jensen 2006: 260). This he considers closer to Bourdieu’s sociology by virtue of an emphasis on ‘the unequal distribution of power to categorize and classify’ (Jensen 2006: 264). Hills is more interested in how that power functions over time, noting that Thornton’s work is mainly synchronic. Replacing this with a diachronic approach – as did Jancovich (2002) – Hills traces temporal changes in how cult cinema is constructed and renegotiated, suggesting that new media has a role to play in the generation of subcultural capital: ‘new media might support new modes of subcultural distinction rather than merely challenging established taste hierarchies’ (Hills 2015: 103). Online accessibility of previously rare material is, says Hills, often ‘presumed to dilute cult’s subcultural capital’, but in fact ‘technological change could give rise to new forms of cultish subcultural capital’ such as ‘mash-ups and re-enactments posted to YouTube’ (Hills 2015: 104, 107; see also Klinger 2011).

Cultural capital remains perhaps the dominant Bourdieuan concept in use within cultural and media studies. Both cultural capital and the concept of

subcultural capital derived from it have been productive tools for recent film and media research. The concept of ‘field’ too has great value for research into any form of cultural production. A clear and resonant definition is given by Bourdieu in his study of television: ‘A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and others who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space’ (Bourdieu 1998a: 40). However, Jensen argues that subcultures are not quite fields, since they lack the stability that characterises the ‘permanent relationships’ that Bourdieu sees in a field. Jensen proposes the terms ‘semi- or quasifields’, or ‘tentative fields, fields in the making’ (Jensen 2006: 266). This compares with the concept of ‘weak field’ explored in our final chapter, by Antonio Di Stefano. But as Chris Cagle writes in this collection, generally ‘the idea of the social field has had less impact than the notions of cultural capital, taste, and distinction’. He continues: ‘film studies as a discipline has by now incorporated Bourdieu to address the matter of the consumption of media texts but it has been less concerned with using Bourdieu to understand the production of media’ (see Chapter Two). Of course, questions of taste, consumption and reception are especially at stake in the way that online activity can function to establish differentials between users – see for example Eileen Culloty in this book (Chapter Four). Her research on different readings of the film *Hunger* posted to the imbd.com website persuasively illustrates Bourdieu’s assertion that, in what he calls ‘art perception’, ‘individuals have difficulty imagining differences other than those which the available system of classification allows them to imagine’ (Bourdieu 1993: 223). As he says elsewhere about the media, ‘whether you’re talking about a speech, a book, or a message on television, the major question of communication is whether the conditions for reception have been fulfilled: Does the person who’s listening have the tools to decode what I’m saying?’ (Bourdieu 1998a: 29). Bourdieu’s use here of the term ‘decode’ recalls Stuart Hall’s influential 1970s essay, ‘Encoding/decoding’. Hall points out that ‘The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical’ (Hall 1980: 131) and that the ‘practices of coding’ are concealed through an illusion of universality or naturalness associated with those codes imposed by the ‘*dominant cultural order*’ (Hall, 1980: 132, 133, italics in original; see also Hall 2013). Bourdieu too reveals – in *Distinction* and elsewhere – the inequalities and universalising assumptions that inform cultural codes. The powerful essay ‘Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception’ reveals how ‘every work is, so to speak, made twice, by the originator and the beholder’, and how one’s mastery of a ‘social code’ determines the ‘*level of reception*’ that one applies to cultural products (Bourdieu 1993: 224–25, italics in original). But reception or decoding is only part of the story.

In using Bourdieu to further our understanding of cultural production, an awareness of historical context and of what we might call the history of relationality is crucial. In Bourdieu's words, the 'entire history of production' is vital in order to understand contemporary production (Bourdieu 1993: 176). For a Bourdieu-inspired approach to film and media, then, the concepts 'history of production' and 'universe of the points under discussion' (Bourdieu 1993: 176) are just as valuable as more well-known keywords such as field, capital and habitus. Bourdieu's essay 'Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works', reprinted in *The Field of Cultural Production*, adds to this list the phrase 'the space of possibles' or 'space of possibilities', shorthand for the choices available to agents in a given social, cultural and historical context; choices that thus become 'the instruments and stakes of the struggle' (Bourdieu 1993: 176). Each 'peculiar universe', then, is one of dominance, a space for the exercise of power, but it is also a place where struggle and improvisation can take place. Hence, contemporary literature, for instance, 'is the product of a long, partly repetitive, history, or, more precisely, a long struggle among theories and theoreticians, writings and writers, readings and readers' (Bourdieu 1993: 184). Such a history is shorter for the fields of film and media – even shorter still for new media – but as several of the chapters in this volume show, the struggle among producers and consumers in turn produces the field itself, from the field of film festivals to that of social media.

The question of time is significant. As Bridget Fowler puts it, each of the fields under analysis here possesses 'their own sense of time'. For his part, Bourdieu asserts that 'It is possible to distinguish, very roughly, *classical periods*', which see the perfection and even exhaustion of 'the possibilities provided by an inherited art of inventing', and '*periods of rupture*, in which a new art of inventing is invented' (Bourdieu 1993: 225, italics in original). To reiterate the importance of how production changes over time, and is only eventually caught up by its reception (via art competence), Bourdieu notes that 'the works produced by means of art production instruments of a new type are bound to be perceived, for a certain time, by means of old instruments of perception, precisely those against which they have been created' (Bourdieu 1993: 225–26). Exemplifying this process, we might note that the perception of early cinema was to a degree determined by conventions established by the theatre and even painting – a 'classical' connection that has been sought by film producers and exhibitors at various times since, via movements such as the film d'art in pre-World War One France. According to the film historian Richard Abel, the years between 1907 and 1911 saw 'Pathé's attempt to redefine the cinema and attract a white-collar and bourgeois audience. Critical support for this effort was needed from

French writers, especially dramatists' (Abel 1998: 40). As a result of such support, largely in the form of theatrical adaptations under the auspices of the tellingly named Société cinématographique des auteurs et des gens de lettres, 'art' cinema was consecrated as akin to theatre (see Abel 1998: 40). Moreover in France, cinema was – and still is – brought into the circle of 'classical' values by the means of the term 'the seventh art', thus ranking film alongside its artistic antecedents from previous epochs. In fact this consecration can be seen as part of the pre-World War One legitimisation of the field in France: the term 'seventh art' was initiated by the Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo in 1911. As well as writing the *Manifesto of the Seventh Art*, Canudo set up France's first cine club and founded a film art review. (The other six arts, by the way, are architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, music and poetry; television is known as the 'eighth art' in France and comic book art as the 'ninth'.)

In terms of the critical perception of new media no less than that of different schools of cinema, a Bourdieuan engagement with digital technologies implies an awareness of how these fields have developed, and a readiness to consider the power differentials within them. For Richenda Herzig (in Chapter Six), this means 'a reconceptualisation of digital inequality, and fresh methodological strategies for exploring it'. Justin Battin, meanwhile, illustrates how mobile media devices can operationalise digital technology and social networks to generate forms of capital and distinction 'within a cultural field that values such distinctions' (see Chapter Seven). Bourdieu's perceptive analysis of the way that art competences function can be illuminating for the study of new media, but has not always been viewed in this light. Indeed, as Richenda Herzig notes, researchers in Internet studies 'have sought to characterise Bourdieu's field theory as limited to an earlier form of modernity', and therefore as of little use when applied to newly developed cultural forms. However as she goes on to add, 'Bourdieu is not trying to advance a prescriptive theory, but rather a conceptual procedure. Contextual features combine with each component of the framework in order to form an entirely unique construction'. Simply put, for Bourdieu, 'the real is relational' (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). In a collection of essays on Bourdieu, language and culture, Christian Vermehren has asserted that media studies in general has been characterised too often by substantialist rather than relational thinking. This has led it to seek the location of reified meaning in a particular producer, text or context. In this regard, he writes, much could be learnt from Bourdieu's approach to the relationality of any given field:

The belief that meaning can thus be found *somewhere* is, in my view, dubious insofar as it ignores the relational aspect of meaning. But even worse,

the attempt to locate the *prime* location of meaning causes serious problems . . . in that it encourages a separation of media content and the context of its production or reception. (Vermehren 1999: 193, italics in original)

We share this concern, and have tried to avoid such a separation between content and context in our case studies. From Bourdieu's own photographs of Algeria during the anti-colonial war against French occupation (see Chapter Three by Sophie Belot) to the news, television and advertising texts circulating around the figure of the millennial hipster (Chapter Five by Anthony McIntyre), we place media texts firmly in the context of their production and reception.

Despite writing rarely on film, Bourdieu did, as is well known, make several targeted interventions with regard to television, including the televised lectures on TV and journalism at the Collège de France in 1996 that were subsequently published in book form as *Sur la télévision / On Television*. Among his insights in this work is the observation that simply by agreeing to appear on television, a scientist, author or other autonomous figure allows external, commercial pressures to reduce the autonomy of their own field (see Bourdieu 1998a: 60). As a result he urges autonomous fields 'to combat these heteronomous individuals' in their midst. But this is not to keep art, culture or 'universality' locked away for the elite. On the contrary, 'We must struggle to . . . defend the conditions of production necessary for the progress of the universal, while working to generalize the conditions of access to that universality' (Bourdieu 1998a: 63, 66). In his account of the adverse reaction of the French media (and especially television journalists) to *On Television*, Bourdieu states that they failed to understand he had approached it as an object of scientific study; that is to say as a field. We would expect no less. But at times his perception of television as a blanket threat to culture may seem a little under-researched – more subjective rather than objective: 'I think that television poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production – for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law' (1998a: 10). Surprisingly for a French commentator, Bourdieu does not mention the cinema in his list of practices under threat from television. He does however mention one of the many film-makers who have often made this point in France: the renowned Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard. Hailing the work of a truly autonomous artist, Bourdieu quotes some of Godard's 1972 interviews and declares that 'a true critique of images through images' is to be found in 'some of Jean-Luc Godard's films'. Godard thus exemplifies for Bourdieu autonomous film-makers' fight for 'the independence of their communication code' (Bourdieu 1998a: 11–12). He adds: 'Indeed, I could have taken Godard's agenda as my own: "This work was a beginning of a

political [I would say sociological] questioning of images and sounds, and of their *relations*” (Bourdieu 1998a: 12, italics in original). While Bourdieu’s appraisal of Godard is well founded, it is noteworthy that it should be Godard rather than any other director who is selected for such attention. Experimental throughout most of his career, and a maverick who is not however without great honour in his (adopted) country, Godard is the most stylistically challenging figure to come out of the French New Wave. Hence despite vast amounts of artistic capital, Godard – unlike the far less formally experimental François Truffaut or Claude Chabrol – has often struggled to find a sizable audience. His major film of 1972, *Tout va bien*, which featured two international stars at the height of their fame in Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, only attracted 30,000 spectators in France (against expectations of at least 100,000). Godard therefore epitomises the Bourdieuan figure of the artist working in a select, autonomous field, experimenting with the medium, and striving to stand outside the demands of the market. But this focus on Godard begs the question: for Bourdieu, can art ever be popular?

Bourdieu’s dismissal of popular culture is no secret. As Bridget Fowler writes, ‘Various critics have noted the clash between Bourdieu’s sympathies with working-class people and his failure to accept that there is such a thing as popular art’ (Fowler 2000: 14). More specifically, ‘his thesis that popular art can become consecrated but *only when it is no longer popular*’ is described by Fowler as oversimplifying ‘the wider struggles over popular art’ and ignoring ‘the differentiated responses to popular culture’ (Fowler 2000: 15, italics in original). Bourdieu can also seem overly schematic and insufficiently open to ambiguity when placing cultural production in one camp or the other. Take a notable example from pop music, The Beatles. Their success in both artistic and commercial terms (even with their most experimental work, such as the so-called White Album) would surely pose a problem for Bourdieu, even if we see popular music as an industry characterised as early as the 1960s by a form of globalisation. For The Beatles managed to combine art and commerce, autonomy and sales, tape loops and number one hits. As their most astute chronicler Ian MacDonald has noted, ‘That The Beatles represented something transmitting at a higher creative frequency was clear even to many outside the pop audience’, including, for example, autonomous literary figures such as Allen Ginsberg (MacDonald 2008: 1, 101). It is only if the field of pop music is considered a priori an economic rather than a cultural one that The Beatles’ twin achievement is not registered.

Where cinema is concerned, Bourdieu again seems careful to maintain the polarity between art and commerce. In his late collection of essays, *Contre-feux 2*, we find a brief account of the development of the field of what

we would call art-house cinema (what he terms *cinéma de recherche*) in post-war France in the years leading up to the New Wave. Bourdieu is astute in emphasising the contribution to the production of symbolic capital made in the 1950s by new audiences (students) and new organs (film clubs, specialist reviews, cinémathèques), but he neglects the commercial imperatives behind even the New Wave, and posits the '*irruption du cinéma commercial*' [sudden emergence of commercial cinema] as a new phenomenon appearing at the turn of the millennium, rather than a presence that has been part of the film industry since its origins a century before (see Bourdieu 2001: 82). French cinema in the sixties, for example, embraced popular comedies, thrillers, war films, even spoofs of the successful Anglo-American James Bond series, alongside the 'consecrated' work of the New Wave directors. And even Godard had to raise money for his films, as the cheque-signing sequence from *Tout va bien* self-consciously acknowledges.

As Godard's New Wave colleague Chabrol had declared a few years earlier – before drifting into more 'middlebrow' if commercially viable projects – diminishing audiences for his own films taught him something terrible but important: '*le fait que le cinéma est obligatoirement un art de masse*' [the fact that cinema is by definition an art for mass consumption] (see Austin 1999: 34). To this we can add Bourdieu's observation that cinema is usually a collective enterprise, carried out within 'production units' that entail a 'transformation of the relationship between producers and their own work' (Bourdieu 1993: 130). Again Chabrol epitomises this, working with a regular team or 'family' of collaborators including technicians, actors and writers, and was happy to adapt scenarios written by others, even if this ran contrary to the auteurist values of the *Cahiers du cinéma* and the New Wave. Chabrol also moved from 'pure' New Wave film-making into genre pictures, including war films, spy spoofs and literary adaptations. The demarcation line between auteur cinema and genre cinema – close to the distinction between restricted production and large-scale cultural production that Bourdieu identifies in his essay 'The Market of Symbolic Goods' – remains operative in film discourse and practice today. Nonetheless, and perhaps surprisingly given his reluctance to engage at length with cinema, Bourdieu is perceptive on the tendency of film genres to change over time, and particularly to develop in the direction of self-conscious allusions, intertextuality, parody or pastiche: 'A genre containing ever more references to the history of that genre calls for a second degree reading, reserved for the initiate, who can only grasp the work's nuances and subtleties by relating it back to previous works'. Rarefied products such as "Intellectual" Westerns' are according to Bourdieu 'the logical conclusion of these *pure cinematographic language games*' (Bourdieu 1993: 128, my italics). Thus a genre



can start off as ‘middlebrow’ but become increasingly ‘pure’ or autonomous. Similar points have subsequently been elaborated by key writers on film genre, such as Rick Altman (see Altman 1999, especially 77–82), but it is instructive to see Bourdieu making this case, especially acknowledging that genre cinema – still a dismissive term in much French discourse on film – can be as nuanced and subtle as so-called art cinema.

In the essay ‘La Culture est en danger’ from *Contre-feux 2*, Bourdieu suggests that globalisation is having a massive but insufficiently acknowledged impact on culture. Referring back to his work in *The Rules of Art*, he notes that the long and arduous formation of artistic fields as autonomous – the rules of art – positioned these fields in contradistinction from the rules that governed the surrounding social world, notably the economic rules (see Bourdieu 2001: 75–76). By contrast, contemporary patterns of globalisation in the developed world have resulted in the collapsing of differences between the cultural and economic fields (the submission of culture to market pressures) and hence a loss of cultural and artistic autonomy. In Bourdieu’s words, the independence of cultural production and circulation ‘*se trouve menacée, dans son principe même, par l’intrusion de la logique commerciale*’ [is threatened, in its very principles, by the intrusion of commercial logic] (Bourdieu 2001: 76, my translation). He gives as examples the marketing of television programmes, books, films and video games as merchandise, just like any other product (Bourdieu 2001: 77). More specifically, Bourdieu’s view of culture in the new millennium included a fear that a kind of involution was taking place, whereby new technologies meant that the artist was being replaced by the technician: ‘*une régression, de l’oeuvre vers le produit, de l’auteur vers l’ingénieur ou le technicien, mettant en jeu des ressources techniques qu’ils n’ont pas eux-mêmes inventées, comme les fameux effets spéciaux*’ [a regression from the work of art to the product, from the author to the engineer or the technician, putting to use technical resources that they have not invented themselves, as in the much talked-about case of special effects] (Bourdieu 2001: 82, my translation). Such a context replaces what Bourdieu calls the ‘traditional cultural producer [as] a master of his means of production’, investing not financial capital or technological resources but ‘only his cultural capital, which was likely to be perceived as a gift of grace’ (Bourdieu 1993: 131).

Bourdieu’s thought is complex and passes through various phases. The militant, millennial urgency of his late writings against neo-liberal globalisation and the spread of *précarité* makes the interventions of *Contre-feux* and *Contre-feux 2* vital political commentary, but they do not always provide the most useful tools for research into contemporary cultural forms. As indicated above, such usefulness derives primarily from Bourdieu’s earlier work from the seventies and eighties, such as the essays gathered

in *The Field of Cultural Production*. But even Bourdieu's late insights in the closing years of the century into the imbrication between fields and the power relations within them can be of great value. His writing on the interrelation of politics and journalism can be applied very effectively to current debates about the function of the media, such as that in the United Kingdom around the influence of press barons in the wake of the phone hacking scandal of recent years. The 1997 article 'La télévision, le journalisme et la politique' on French journalists' position in the political world predicts the relations between the Murdoch press and British politicians ten or fifteen years later: '*où ils sont des acteurs très influents sans être pour autant des membres à part entière et où ils sont en mesure d'offrir aux hommes politiques des services symboliques indispensables*' [they (journalists) play a very influential role without actually standing entirely apart; they are in a position to offer politicians symbolic services which are indispensable] (Bourdieu 1998b: 79, my translation). For Bourdieu, the field of journalism, insofar as it relates to politics through strategies such as structural amnesia, the obsession with scoops and novelties, cynicism, lack of continuity, and the promotion of combat rather than debate, creates an effect of depoliticisation, or more exactly generates a disenchantment with politics (Bourdieu 1998b: 80). The more general result is '*une représentation instantéiste et discontinuiste du monde*' and a vision that is '*déshistoricisée et déshistoricisante, atomisée et atomisante*' [a short-termist and discontinuous representation of the world, dehistoricised and dehistoricising, atomised and atomising] (Bourdieu 1998b: 82, my translation). And again, in a 1997 interview, Bourdieu declared that '*Les médias sont, dans l'ensemble, un facteur de dépoliticisation qui agit évidemment en priorité sur les fractions les plus dépoliticisées du public*' [the media are, on the whole, a depoliticising factor which obviously works above all on the most depoliticised fractions of the public] (Bourdieu 1998b: 88, my translation).

We would do well to bear this in mind when we read that politics 'has become coterminous with popular culture' or that 'politics can be understood as a form of popular culture' (Street 2001: 217, 223). Bourdieu reminds us that it can be a depoliticised, depoliticising form of politics that is evident in 'the media' and in popular culture. The real workings of power may be elsewhere. As he notes in *On Television*, TV 'can hide by showing'. Inasmuch as he engaged with the role of the media in politics, therefore, Bourdieu saw television as 'a formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order' (Bourdieu 1998a: 19, 17). His position with regard to new digital media would no doubt have been what Barrie Axford terms the third position – neither 'techno-progressive' nor 'retro-nostalgic' but sceptical about the supposedly transformative power of new media,

seeing the latter as ‘instrumentalities for the more or less efficient delivery of usual politics’ (Axford 2001: 9). But speculating about what Bourdieu might have said about digital and screen cultures is not the point. It is time to use Bourdieu’s sociological and cultural insights in order to develop our own ways of addressing, evaluating and interrogating such forms in an illuminating way. That is the hope of this collection.

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