

Symposium

Aesthetics, Culture and Education

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In Brecht's play *The Mother*, which he based on Gorky's novel of the same name, Vlassova the proletarian heroine of the story states that, if the middle classes have no respect for, and no need of, their education, then they would do well to hand it over to the underprivileged who could certainly use it to their own advantage. Her sharp observation on conspicuous waste might well serve as an epigram for Jacques Delaruelle's critique in 'Aesthetics and Art Education' (*Literature and Aesthetics*, October 1994) where he draws attention to the fact that aesthetics is missing in the curricula of Colleges of Fine Arts and similar institutions. Delaruelle remarks that in postgraduate seminars the 'discussion of Plato's, Aristotle's, Aquinas', Kant's, Schelling's, Hegel's, Nietzsche's and Heidegger's contribution to the understanding of art seems, on the whole, barely acceptable as "cultural literacy". Delaruelle may not be pleased to find himself in the company of Brecht, Gorky and others cited below. However, they provide a relevant subtext to his critique, not least because what can be inferred from its details encompasses issues requiring closer attention.

Vlassova's declaration as to the value of an established, traditional, or simply ruling-class education is based on the idea that such an education is useful to those who have been deprived of it because, in taking up the knowledge, know-how, truth, beauty and any other absolute belonging to the canon created and disseminated by dominant social groups—however narrowly conceived knowledge, beauty and so on, may have been by the latter—they gain access to the organizing institutions of society, which govern the lives of all men and women. By means of their education the ruling classes have also set into place the political mechanisms that keep a check on people and institutions alike, and trace out their trajectory, present and future. Consequently, being educated guarantees some degree of empowerment, including intervention in politics. And education necessarily incorporates art and culture, for to be educated, as those on top have continued to indicate to those beneath them, is also to be cultivated. Its value,

then, for the people on the bottom is its use-value, not as petty pragmatism or even pettier opportunism, but as social purposefulness and social action. The latter, in Vlassova's terms, is the means by which the damned and the despised can pull themselves out of the mud and acquire the status of human beings. The qualitative move, then, which occurs when education and culture are possessed, is the move from the most primitive form of existence to life. According to Vlassova, the qualitative leap for persons is imbricated in a qualitative change for society, persons and structures being part and parcel of each other.

What we have here through Gorky via Brecht is close to Gramsci's argument that bourgeois culture, far from being despised, should be harnessed to the cause of large-scale social transformation since not only does it provide the illiterate with the instruments for literacy, but also encompasses everything that, conceptually as well as practically, has made societies work for the benefit of those working them. The appropriation of bourgeois culture entails nothing less than an entry into the processes of making history, from which the culturally expropriated had been excluded. As is well known, Gramsci does not go into discussions about the ontological 'subject' : this he leaves with Hegel and, as fate would have it, to Foucault, among other critics of so-called humanist theories of consciousness, will, individual autonomy and individual wholeness or coherence. Gramsci is concerned with the sociopolitical agent of action through whose figure he attempts to explain who pushes whom off the world stage and for which reasons, the 'making of history' being synonymous not with the 'telos' decried by Foucault (and Deleuze, and Derrida, and Baudrillard, and countless epigones of these French stars) but with what in our tepid, tired times would be called 'minority rights'. Culture, for Gramsci, necessarily includes art culture whose aristocratic and, subsequently, middle-class origins, he fully acknowledges; and it includes the framework of reflection and assessment—aesthetics—to which art is attached. The point is not to throw out aesthetics, however debatable, in Gramsci's view, its criteria of worthiness where art works are concerned, or its criteria of taste where art admirers are concerned, but to grasp, know, deal with and act upon the canon so that its hegemonic rule cannot go unchallenged, nor its grip stifle any alternative form of culture coming from the 'subaltern classes'.¹

Of course, Gramsci enlisted all this in the struggle for socialism at a time when the latter seemed the only alternative to fascism. And, although it has become more than fashionable, since the collapse of

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Eastern Europe, to debunk socialism—indeed more fashionable than extolling the virtues of liberal democracy, notwithstanding Fukuyama's big bid for the limelight—Gramsci's analysis is hardly obsolete for a period—ours—that, on the one hand, denigrates classical learning (canonical, 'repressive', 'dead white male', and so on, depending on the interest group speaking) and, on the other, erects an 'alternative' program in the manner of positive discrimination.² Meanwhile, somewhere else again, is set up a seemingly value-free, merely utilitarian 'information bank' that is supposedly accessible to all (hence, is supposedly democratic), but that, in reality, favours those who know how to manipulate the 'bank' best. The 'bank' thus serves the interests of those-in-the-know who, in addition, deride non-utilitarian, 'useless' knowledge, a category to which aesthetics would perforce belong. In short, the battle of interest groups today continues the war that Gramsci saw being waged on the larger scale still of historical, class struggle and ideological legitimacy and legitimation.

What constitutes 'cultural literacy' is much more, as Delaruelle must understand perfectly well, than a matter of content, of, say, Kant rather than Germaine Greer or Camille Paglia in the modern curriculum. The debates of the nineteen twenties and thirties were partisan, this showing only too clearly how much was at stake, whether it involved the preservation of social structures and their elites, or the ideal of a people's state and the abolition of elites. It took a Pierre Bourdieu to insist once again, albeit some forty years later and, this time, from a non-militant, although not depoliticized point of view, on how education, art and culture were embroiled in social struggle. He also gave older debates a new twist by focusing on how the privileged enclaves of society produce, define and reproduce 'cultural literacy', which ensures their place in the social hierarchy and confers symbolic power upon them. These privileged enclaves are not, Bourdieu argues, privileged in the same way. Groups that wield economic power, for instance, may well acquire a social standing commensurate with their wealth, but they may not have the requisite 'cultural capital' to give them cultural supremacy, whether material or symbolic. 'Cultural capital' may be defined briefly here as the requisite storehouse of learning (literary, painterly, theatrical, musical, and so on), of attitude and approach, and of impeccable judgement and taste (judgement and taste being set by whichever elites reign in a given time-frame or period). By the same token, groups that have accumulated intellectual and cultural 'goods' (Bourdieu's term) may have neither economic back-up, nor social status or, for that matter,

any political clout to speak of. These groups are effectively powerless in any concrete sense of the word. Nevertheless, they may exercise symbolic power over those who have little cultural capital or none at all and, in this way maintain, however precariously, their claim to distinction. In short, cultural elites may not be elites in any other form (that is, not economic, nor political, and so on).³ By way of a parenthesis, it is worth noting the—piquant—relevance of Bourdieu's analysis for the present situation of academics whose hold on the last vestiges of symbolic power left to them by an overriding power structure is so precarious that they risk losing it altogether.

The upshot of Bourdieu's argument is like Zeno's paradox of the hare and the tortoise: access to culture is unequal and is bound to stay unequal, since a start from a disadvantaged position entails being disadvantaged forever. Thus, irrespective of exceptions that confirm the rule, the children of working-class parents will never quite catch up with their middle-class peers. They will never quite acquire the amount, range and kind of knowledge had by children to whom the world of learning and of the arts is available from an early age in the household. Nor will they be able to assume the manner, tone and style through which their familiarity with culture is communicated by those born to it. Moreover, they are denied the kind of ease that comes from a family history of 'cultural literacy', when cultivated generations succeed cultivating ones. The channels of transmission from grandparents to parents to children are integral to the reproduction of social classes. Each goes to its own, whether at the top or the bottom of the social hierarchy. Reproduction at the top follows the principle that nothing succeeds like success. Reproduction at the bottom ensures the survival of ways of life enjoyed by the lower classes, but whose culture is spurned by their superiors in the name of the latter's 'distinguished' culture.⁴

It must not be forgotten that, according to Bourdieu, the top is not a homogeneous ensemble. Multiple, different elites coexist, but do not necessarily coincide: economic elites may be cultural underlings, as was indicated above. Although none of them can have it all, all the time, the chances are, Bourdieu argues, that people who are well-off can buy the culture that is defined by their cultural superiors as the right one. Having bought it, they close ranks. Put differently, this means that, for all their differences in kind, elites protect themselves. Identification of self through a corporate body, in this case, *the elite*, is fundamental to the processes of reproduction. In the context of these ideas, it is not difficult to see how the disappearance of aesthetics

from the pedagogical scene, as referred to by Delaruelle, may be a way of belittling 'distinguished' culture, of settling scores with superiors of the past and with anyone, in the present, on whom difference and real distinction could be conferred. The motives, however, for this possible 'revenge' has precious little in common with Bourdieu's humanistic defence of the people who have benefited least from the best—in terms of 'literacy', art, economic security and any other terms.

Bourdieu, specifically on aesthetics, maintains that qualities thought to be intrinsic to art are, in fact, socially generated, as are matters of taste. Taste is not determined by the nobility of an art work but by groups who impose their taste on others through a network of activities that channel values, beliefs and sensibilities. The notion of imposition evoked here has nothing to do with conspiracy theories, nor even with theories of submission and control, as best exemplified by Foucault.⁵ It has to do, firstly, with Bourdieu's premise that nothing can happen outside society, which is why art cannot be 'pure' nor taste an expression of some inner propensity for what is good, beautiful and true. His theory that perception, reception and appreciation are socially constructed provides the nuts and bolts of Bourdieu's critique of Kant, and especially of Kant's propositions regarding the 'inherent' sense of beauty in those endowed with 'taste'.⁶ Secondly, Bourdieu's argument that taste is not given but imposed—so, consequently, are judgements as to the value, quality and importance of this rather than that piece of art—is intimately bound up, on the one hand, with what he describes as 'positions and dispositions' and, on the other, as 'fields'. 'Positions and dispositions' refers to the social space occupied by any particular group (for which, Bourdieu believes, such terms as 'upper-class' or 'lower-class' are inadequate given the complexity of social stratification in the modern world). It refers, as well, to the approach, and mental and emotional outlook and openness fostered within that social space and which is peculiar to it. 'Fields' refers to the organizational infrastructure through which art works are distributed, supported, appreciated (by critics, other specialists, and the public) and in which they are bought and sold. What I have termed 'organizational infrastructure' would refer, in the case of the visual arts, to the galleries, museums, art journals, art societies, competitions, prizes, advertising, and the like, which propagate certain works (and ignore others) and, by doing so, construct a whole system of evaluation that implicates works and audiences in one fell swoop. Qualities are ascribed to works. Taste is established.⁷

It is in this framework that Delaruelle's remarks on the confusion in education as to what constitutes 'art' may be usefully placed. This confusion, he implies, reflects the predominant position today among artists, namely, that anyone can be an artist and anything can be art. (One could, in fact, argue that this apparently democratic *laissez faire* in which artists and educationists—not to mention the art network as a whole—seem to be in collusion is actually the expression of a fierce struggle for self-assertion: a defiant 'I am as good as anyone' that comes from a refusal to recognize authority or even mere superiority to oneself; a rejection of hierarchies that distinguish between 'masters' and 'masterworks' and 'secondary' or 'minor' artists and art.) What I am suggesting is that Bourdieu can help to elucidate this state of affairs because it is a walking, talking parody, a crude travesty, of his critique of how and why claims to artistic and intellectual supremacy are established and what pressures they exert socially even when they appear to be confined to the 'disinterested' realm, the special domain, of the imagination and ideas. In other words, what in Bourdieu is an intricate argument about the numerous interactions taking place in any society at any one time—art being part and parcel of them—becomes, in the 'cool'—some call it postmodernist—sphere of contemporary practices in art and education the equivalent of icon-bashing and *sui generis* justification.

None of this means that Bourdieu can be blamed for the current dismissal of classical/hierarchical/elitist learning, art and culture. Bourdieu, it is worth repeating, is iconoclastic only insofar as he defends the principle that 'everything is social':⁸ nothing is of itself alone. Consequently, the icons he attacks are socially, that is, *collectively* defined. They are not the private fantasies of one individual. For these reasons, he would consider Thierry de Duve's theory, which Delaruelle paraphrases as 'art is all that which I name art', to be nothing other than a go-getting subjectivism that simply cannot deal with the interface between subjective perception and objective phenomena. Mere seeing, or saying, does not, in Bourdieu, make it so. In addition, mere naming is a far cry from the *practice* that is art. Delaruelle speaks of the 'disastrous trend' in current art education. Arguably, this trend points to the emergence of new groups, in universities and colleges across the board, who, under the guise of 'pure' individualism and/or anti-elitism, are actually striving to become new elites. As such, they are caught up in the pursuit of symbolic power without realizing, yet, that it is illusory and a mere simulacrum of the real power that is being exercised by someone else. This

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'someone else'—these others—are neither artists nor academics. Among them, however, is one new elite, a managerial caste that has sliced itself away from its academic origins, but which still pretends to have academic status, knowing full well, just the same, that this status is a sham. Furthermore, secure in its perfidious knowledge, the parvenu caste can exploit even better a lamentable situation for its own personal gain. As if this were not enough, it still presumes to judge, on so-called 'academic' grounds, those who, in fair play, would be its peers. Roll over Plato and *tutti quanti* : since this is no place for peers, it will not hold superiors. But who will be the judge of the *legitimacy* of the judges?⁹ So much for the killing of learned culture.

Notes

- 1 See, in particular, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, Rome, 1979 and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower, Cambridge, Mass., 1985. For an illuminating commentary on Gramsci's ideas about the various forms of culture that can make up a national culture, without the latter's being the culture of an elite, see Robert S. Dombroski, *Antonio Gramsci*, Boston, 1989, esp. pp.74–121.
- 2 I am, of course, referring to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, 1993.
- 3 Bourdieu's argument on the formation of elites runs right through his writings, but is possibly most trenchantly expressed along the lines I have suggested here in his *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, 1979 (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass., 1984) and *Choses dites*, Paris, 1987.
- 4 For the arguments relevant to the above points on cultural heritage and social reproduction see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers*, Paris, 1964 and *La Reproduction*, Paris, 1970 (in English as *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London, 1990).
- 5 The canonical text on the subject is his *Surveiller et punir. La Naissance de la prison*, Paris, 1975. (In English as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, 1977.) Instructive also are the interviews with Foucault in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, New York, 1980, pp.109–165.
- 6 *La Distinction*, pp.543–585. For a critique of Bourdieu on Kant and an argument against Bourdieu from the French intellectual perspective in which he, notwithstanding Bourdieu's international horizons and international acclaim is to be viewed, see Bruno Péquignot, *Pour une sociologie esthétique*, Paris, 1993, pp.169–183. Péquignot describes Bourdieu's criticism of Kant as a 'misunderstanding' and attempts to explain (not altogether successfully) how it is possible to combine aesthetics and sociology, that is, speak of the qualities of a work of art and thus give them their particular status as belonging to art and nothing else and, at the same time, take into consideration their social genesis

and impact, as well as how they are constituted through the minds of their—socially-formed—beholders. Bourdieu aims for nothing less than a complete understanding of how what is proper to art (this including issues of form, genre, style, technique, execution) and to the apperceptions and emotions it inspires is produced in a specific work or professional context in a specific social context and within the restraints, historical and geographical, pertinent to this double context. Pequignot tends to reduce Bourdieu's argument, which does not always explain absolutely clearly the articulation between art and society and aesthetics and sociology, to a matter of the social conditions of the reception of art pure and simple. In doing so, he returns to the question raised with such brio in the 1960s and 70s, and which became the special provenance of French structuralists (rewriting the Russian Formalists), on the specificity of art.

- 7 These concepts appear consistently throughout Bourdieu's work. A fairly succinct account of them specifically in relation to art works is to be found in *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, 1992, pp.356–371. This book and the essays published in English as *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introduced by Randal Johnson, 1993 give a good idea of how Bourdieu's theses on art and literature fit into his work as a whole.
- 8 Bourdieu's exasperated exclamation in an interview, on the publication of *Les Règles de l'art*, in reply to the journalist's question whether he, Bourdieu, had reduced art to the 'merely' social. See *Magazine littéraire*, October 1992, p.110.
- 9 This theme, which is here put in the form of a question, pervades Bourdieu's *Homo academicus*, Paris, 1984.