



# *Distinction*

*A Social Critique of the  
Judgement of Taste*

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being made eternal. Such is the basis of the 'barbarous taste' to which the most antithetical forms of the dominant aesthetic always refer negatively and which only recognizes realist representation, in other words, a respectful, humble, submissive representation of objects designated by their beauty or their social importance.

**AESTHETICS, ETHICS AND AESTHETICISM** When faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence. These schemes, giving rise to products of an unwilling, unselfconscious systematicity, are opposed to the more or less fully stated principles of an aesthetic.<sup>30</sup> The result is a systematic 'reduction' of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favour of 'human' content, which is barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic.<sup>31</sup> Everything takes place as if the emphasis on form could only be achieved by means of a neutralization of any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation which accompanies (without any necessary cause-effect relation) mastery of the means of grasping the distinctive properties which this particular form takes on in its relations with other forms (i.e., through reference to the universe of works of art and its history).

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Confronted with a photograph of an old woman's hands, the culturally most deprived express a more or less conventional emotion or an ethical complicity but never a specifically aesthetic judgement (other than a negative one): 'Oh, she's got terribly deformed hands! . . . There's one thing I don't get (the left hand)—it's as if her left thumb was about to come away from her hand. Funny way of taking a photo. The old girl must've worked hard. Looks like she's got arthritis. She's definitely crippled, unless she's holding her hands like that (imitates gesture)? Yes, that's it, she's got her hand bent like that. Not like a duchess's hands or even a typist's! . . . I really feel sorry seeing that poor old woman's hands, they're all knotted, you might say' (manual worker, Paris). With the lower middle classes, exaltation of ethical virtues comes to the forefront ('hands worn out by toil'), sometimes tinged with populist sentimentality ('Poor old thing! Her hands must really hurt her. It really gives a sense of pain'); and sometimes even concern for aesthetic properties and references to painting make their appearance: 'It's as if it was a painting that had been photographed . . . Must be really beautiful as a painting' (clerical worker, Paris). 'That reminds me of a picture I saw in an exhibition of Spanish paintings, a monk with his hands clasped in front of him and deformed fingers' (technician, Paris). 'The sort of hands you see in early Van Goghs, an old peasant woman or people eating potatoes' (junior executive, Paris). At higher levels in the social hierarchy, the remarks become increasingly abstract, with (other people's) hands, labour and old age functioning as allegories or symbols which serve as pretexts for general reflections on general problems:



'Those are the hands of someone who has worked too much, doing very hard manual work . . . As a matter of fact it's very unusual to see hands like that' (engineer, Paris). 'These two hands unquestionably evoke a poor and unhappy old age' (teacher, provinces). An aestheticizing reference to painting, sculpture or literature, more frequent, more varied and more subtly handled, resorts to the neutralization and distancing which bourgeois discourse about the social world requires and performs. 'I find this a very beautiful photograph. It's the very symbol of toil. It puts me in mind of Flaubert's old servant-woman . . . That woman's gesture, at once very humble . . . It's terrible that work and poverty are so deforming' (engineer, Paris).

A portrait of a heavily made-up woman, taken from an unusual angle with unusual lighting, provokes very similar reactions. Manual workers, and even more so craftsmen and small shopkeepers, react with horror and disgust: 'I wouldn't like that photo in my house, in my room. It isn't very nice to look at. It's rather painful' (manual worker, provinces). 'Is she dead? Ghastly, enough to keep you awake at night . . . ghastly, horrible, I don't want to look at it' (shopkeeper, provinces). While most of the office workers and junior executives reject a photo which they can only describe as 'frightful' or 'unpleasant to look at', some of them try to characterize the technique: 'The photo is very well taken, very beautiful, but horrible' (clerical worker, Paris). 'What gives the impression of something monstrous is the expression on the face of the man or woman who is the subject of the photo and the angle from which it has been taken, that's to say looking up from below' (junior executive, Paris). Others appeal to aesthetic references, mainly drawn from the cinema: 'A rather fantastic sort of character, or at least rather bizarre . . . it could be a Dreyer character, Bergman at a pinch,



The Lacq gasworks by night

or perhaps even Eisenstein, in *Ivan the Terrible* . . . I like it a lot' (technician, Paris). Most of the senior executives and members of the professions find the photograph 'beautiful' and 'expressive' and make reference not only to the films of Bergman, Orson Welles, Dreyer, and others, but also to the theatre, invoking Hamlet, Macbeth or Racine's *Athalie*.

When confronted with a photograph of the Lacq gas refinery, which is likely to disconcert realist expectations both by its subject, an industrial complex, normally excluded from the world of legitimate representation, and by the treatment it receives (night photography), manual workers perplexed, hesitate, and eventually, in most cases, admit defeat: 'At first sight it's a construction in metal but I can't make head or tail of it. It might be something used in an electric power station . . . I can't make out what it is, it's a mystery to me' (manual worker, provinces). 'Now, that one really bothers me, I haven't got anything to say about it . . . I can't see what it could be, apart from the lighting. It isn't car headlights, it wouldn't be all straight lines like that. Down here I can see a railing and a goods lift, no, really, I can't say' (manual worker, Paris). 'That's something to do with electronics, I don't know anything about that' (manual worker, Paris). Among small employers, who tend to be hostile to modern art experiments and, more generally, to all art in which they cannot see the marks and traces of work, a sense of confusion often leads to simple refusal: 'That is of no interest, it may be all very fine, but not for me. It's always the same thing. Personally that stuff leaves me cold' (craftsman, provinces). 'I've tried to work out if it really is a photo. Perhaps it's a reproduction of a drawing done with a few pencil lines . . . I wouldn't know what to do with a photo like that. Perhaps it suits modern tastes. Up and down with the pencil and they like it. And as for the photo and the photographer, they don't deserve any credit, they've done nothing at all. The artist did it all, he's the one who ought to take the credit, he's the one who drew it' (shop-

keeper, provinces). Office workers and junior executives, who are just as disconcerted as the manual workers and small employers, but are less inclined to admit it than the former and less inclined than the latter to challenge the legitimacy of what challenges them, less often decline to give a verdict:<sup>32</sup> 'I like it as a photo . . . because it's all drawn out; they're just lines, it seems immense to me . . . A vast piece of scaffolding . . . It's just light, captured by the camera' (clerical worker, Paris). 'Buffet likes doing things like that' (technician, Paris). But only among members of the dominant class, who most often recognize the object represented, does judgement of form take on full autonomy vis-à-vis judgement of content ('It's inhuman but aesthetically beautiful because of the contrasts'), and the representation is apprehended as such, without reference to anything other than itself or realities of the same class ('abstract painting', 'avant-garde plays' etc.).

The variations in the attitude to a very comparable object, a metal frame, provide a numerical proof of this: the proportion of respondents who think it could make a beautiful photo is 6 percent among manual workers and domestic servants, 9 percent among craftsmen and small shopkeepers, 9.5 percent among the clerical workers and junior administrative executives, 24 percent among the primary teachers and technicians, 24.5 percent in the dominant class—and 50 percent among the secondary and higher-education teachers. (One may assume that the reactions aroused by the architecture of the Beaubourg Centre obey the same principles.)

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The aestheticism which makes the artistic intention the basis of the 'art of living' implies a sort of moral agnosticism, the perfect antithesis of the ethical disposition which subordinates art to the values of the art of living. The aesthetic intention can only contradict the dispositions of the ethos or the norms of the ethic which, at each moment, define the legitimate objects and modes of representation for the different social classes, excluding from the universe of the 'representable' certain realities and certain ways of representing them. Thus the easiest, and so the most frequent and most spectacular way to 'shock (*épater*) the bourgeois' by proving the extent of one's power to confer aesthetic status is to *transgress* ever more radically the ethical censorships (e.g., in matters of sex) which the other classes accept even within the area which the dominant disposition defines as aesthetic. Or, more subtly, it is done by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time, or on objects that are given aesthetic status by dominated 'aesthetics'.

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One only has to read the index of contents recently published by *Art Vivant* (1974), a 'vaguely modern review run by a clique of academics who are vaguely art historians' (as an avant-garde painter nicely put it), which occupies a sort of neutral point in the field of avant-garde art criticism between *Flashart* or *Art Press* and *Artitude* or *Opus*. In the list of features and titles one finds: *Africa* (one title: 'Art Must Be for All'), *Architecture* (two

titles, including 'Architecture without an Architect'), *Comic Strips* (five titles, nine pages out of the forty-six in the whole index), *Kids' Art, Kitsch* (three titles, five pages), *Photography* (two titles, three pages), *Street Art* (fifteen titles, twenty-three pages, including 'Art in the Street?', 'Art in the Street, First Episode', 'Beauty in the Back-Streets: You Just Have to Know How to Look', 'A Suburb Sets the Pace'), *Science-Fiction-Utopia* (two titles, three pages), *Underground* (one title), *Writing-Ideograms-Graffiti* (two titles, four pages). The aim of inverting or *transgressing*, which is clearly manifested by this list, is necessarily contained within the limits assigned to it a contrario by the aesthetic conventions it denounces and by the need to secure recognition of the aesthetic nature of the transgression of the limits (i.e., recognition of its conformity to the norms of the transgressing group). Hence the almost Markovian logic of the choices, with, for the cinema, Antonioni, Chaplin, cinémathèque, Eisenstein, eroticism-pornography, Fellini, Godard, Klein, Monroe, underground, Warhol.

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This commitment to symbolic transgression, which is often combined with political neutrality or revolutionary aestheticism, is the almost perfect antithesis of petit-bourgeois moralism or of what Sartre used to call the revolutionary's 'seriousness'.<sup>33</sup> The ethical indifference which the aesthetic disposition implies when it becomes the basis of the art of living is in fact the root of the ethical aversion to artists (or intellectuals) which manifests itself particularly vehemently among the declining and threatened fractions of the petite bourgeoisie (especially independent craftsmen and shopkeepers), who tend to express their regressive and repressive dispositions in all areas of practice (especially in educational matters and vis-à-vis students and student demonstrations), but also among the rising fractions of that class whose striving for virtue and whose deep insecurity render them very receptive to the phantasm of 'pornocracy'.

The pure disposition is so universally recognized as legitimate that no voice is heard pointing out that the definition of art, and through it the art of living, is an object of struggle among the classes. Dominated life-styles (*arts de vivre*), which have practically never received systematic expression, are almost always perceived, even by their defenders, from the destructive or reductive viewpoint of the dominant aesthetic, so that their only options are degradation or self-destructive rehabilitation ('popular culture'). This is why it is necessary to look to Proudhon<sup>34</sup> for a naively systematic expression of the petit-bourgeois aesthetic, which subordinates art to the core values of the art of living and identifies the cynical perversion of the artist's life-style as the source of the absolute primacy given to form:

'Under the influence of property, the artist, *depraved* in his reason, *disolute in his morals, venal and without dignity*, is the impure image of egoism. The idea of *justice* and *honesty* slides over his heart without taking root, and of all the classes of society, the artist class is the poorest in strong souls and noble characters.'<sup>35</sup>

'Art for art's sake, as it has been called, not having its legitimacy within itself, being based on nothing, is nothing. It is *debauchery* of the heart and *dissolution* of the mind. Separated from right and duty, cultivated and pursued as the highest thought of the soul and the supreme manifestation of humanity, art or the ideal, stripped of the greater part of itself, reduced to nothing more than an *excitement of fantasy and the senses*, is the source of *sin*, the origin of all servitude, the poisoned spring from which, according to the Bible, flow all the *fornications* and abominations of the earth . . . Art for art's sake, I say, verse for verse's sake, style for style's sake, form for form's sake, fantasy for fantasy's sake, all the diseases which like a plague of lice are gnawing away at our epoch, are *vice* in all its refinement, the quintessence of evil.'<sup>36</sup>

What is condemned is the autonomy of form and the artist's right to the formal refinements by which he claims mastery of what ought to be merely a matter of 'execution': 'I have no quarrel with nobility, or elegance, or pose, or style, or gesture, or any aspect of what constitutes the execution of a work of art and is the usual object of traditional criticism.'<sup>37</sup>

Dependent on demand in the choice of their objects, artists take their revenge in the execution: 'There are church painters, history painters, genre painters (in other words, painters of anecdotes or farces), portrait painters, landscape painters, animal painters, seascape painters, painters of Venus, painters of fantasy. One specializes in nudes, another in drapery. Then each one endeavours to distinguish himself by one of the means which contribute to the execution. One goes in for sketching, another for colour; this one attends to composition, that one to perspective, a third to costume or local colour; one shines through sentiment, another through his idealized or realistic figures; yet another redeems the futility of his subject by the fineness of his detail. Each strives to have his own trick, his own 'je ne sais quoi', a personal manner, and so, with the help of fashion, reputations are made and unmade.'<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to this decadent art cut off from social life, respecting neither God nor man, an art worthy of the name must be subordinated to science, morality and justice. It must aim to arouse the moral sense, to inspire feelings of dignity and delicacy, to idealize reality, to substitute for the thing the ideal of the thing, by painting the true and not the real. In a word, it must educate. To do so, it must transmit not 'personal impressions' (like David in *The Tennis-Court Oath*, or Delacroix) but, like Courbet in *Les Paysans de Flagey*, reconstitute the social and historical truth which *all* may judge. ('Each of us only has to consult himself to be able, after brief consideration, to state a judgement on any work of art.')<sup>39</sup> And it would be a pity to conclude without quoting a eulogy of the small detached house which would surely be massively endorsed by the middle and working classes: 'I would give the Louvre, the Tuileries, Notre-Dame—and the Vendôme column into the bargain—to live in my own home, in a *little house of my own design*, where I would live alone, in

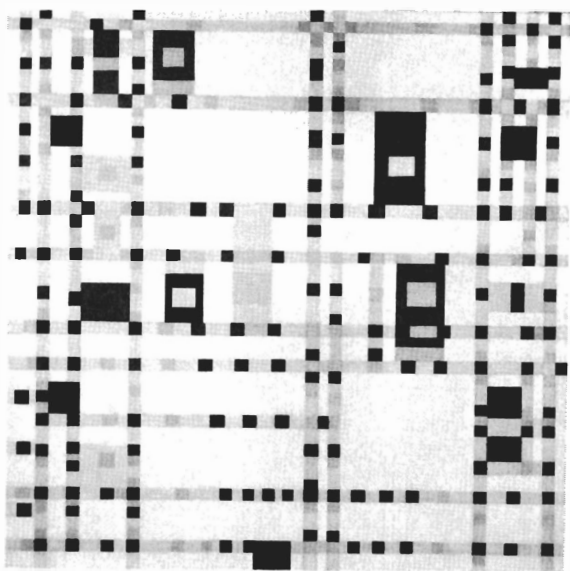


the middle of a little plot of ground, a quarter of an acre or so, where I'd have water, shade, a lawn, and silence. And if I thought of putting a statue in it, it wouldn't be a Jupiter or an Apollo—those gentlemen are nothing to me—nor views of London, Rome, Constantinople or Venice. God preserve me from such places! I'd put there what I lack—mountains, vineyards, meadows, goats, cows, sheep, reapers and shepherds.<sup>40</sup>

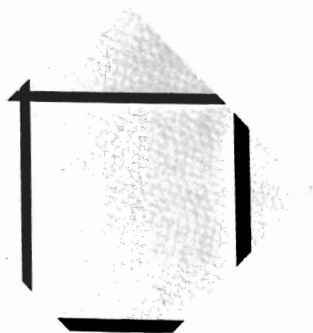
NEUTRALIZATION AND THE UNIVERSE OF POSSIBLES Unlike non-specific perception, the specifically aesthetic perception of a work of art (in which there are of course degrees of accomplishment) is armed with a pertinence principle which is socially constituted and acquired. This principle of selection enables it to pick out and retain, from among the elements offered to the eye (e.g., leaves or clouds considered merely as indices or signals invested with a denotative function—'It's a poplar', 'There's going to be a storm'), all the stylistic traits—and only those—which, when relocated in the universe of stylistic possibilities, distinguish a particular manner of treating the elements selected, whether clouds or leaves, that is, a style as a mode of representation expressing the mode of perception and thought that is proper to a period, a class or class fraction, a group of artists or a particular artist. No stylistic characterization of a work of art is possible without presupposing at least implicit reference to the compossible alternatives, whether simultaneous—to distinguish it from its contemporaries—or successive—to contrast it with earlier or later works by the same or a different artist. Exhibitions devoted to an artist's whole oeuvre or to a genre (e.g., the still-life exhibition in Bordeaux in 1978) are the objective realization of the field of interchangeable stylistic possibilities which is brought into play when one 'recognizes' the singularities of the characteristic style of a work of art. As E. H. Gombrich demonstrates, Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* only takes on its 'full meaning' in terms of a previous idea of Mondrian's work and of the expectations it favours. The 'impression of gay abandon' given by the play of bright, strongly contrasting patches of colour can only arise in a mind familiar with 'an art of straight lines and a few primary colours in carefully balanced rectangles' and capable of perceiving the 'relaxed style of popular music' in the distance from the 'severity' which is expected. And as soon as one imagines this painting attributed to Gino Severini, who tries to express in some of his paintings 'the rhythm of dance music in works of brilliant chaos', it is clear that, measured by this stylistic yardstick, Mondrian's picture would rather suggest the first *Brandenburg Concerto*.<sup>41</sup>

The aesthetic disposition, understood as the aptitude for perceiving and deciphering specifically stylistic characteristics, is thus inseparable from specifically artistic competence. The latter may be acquired by explicit learning or simply by regular contact with works of art, especially those assembled in museums and galleries, where the diversity of their

Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*



Piet Mondrian,  
*Painting I*



Gino Severini, *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin*

original functions is neutralized by their being displayed in a place consecrated to art, so that they invite pure interest in form. This practical mastery enables its possessor to situate each element of a universe of artistic representations in a class defined in relation to the class composed of all the artistic representations consciously or unconsciously excluded. Thus, an awareness of the stylistic features which make up the stylistic originality of all the works of a period relative to those of another period, or, within this class, of the works of one school relative to another, or of the works of one artist relative to the works of his school or period, or even of an artist's particular period or work relative to his whole oeuvre, is inseparable from an awareness of the stylistic redundancies, i.e., the typical treatments of the pictorial matter which define a style. In short, a grasp of the resemblances presupposes implicit or explicit reference to the differences, and vice versa. Attribution is always implicitly based on reference to 'typical works', consciously or unconsciously selected because they present to a particularly high degree the qualities more or less explicitly recognized as pertinent in a given system of classification. Everything suggests that, even among specialists, the criteria of pertinence which define the stylistic properties of 'typical works' generally remain implicit and that the aesthetic taxonomies implicitly mobilized to distinguish, classify and order works of art never have the rigour which aesthetic theories sometimes try to lend them.

In fact, the simple placing which the amateur or specialist performs when he undertakes attribution has nothing in common with the genuinely scientific intention of grasping the work's immanent reason and *raison d'être* by reconstructing the perceived situation, the subjectively experienced problematic, which is nothing other than the space of the positions and self-positionings constituting the field and within which the artistic intention of the artist in question has defined itself, generally by opposition. The references which this reconstructing operation deploys have nothing to do with the kinds of semantic echo or affective correspondence which adorn celebratory discourse—they are the indispensable means of constructing the field of thematic or stylistic possibilities in relation to which, objectively and to some extent subjectively, the possibility selected by the artist presented itself. Thus, to understand why the early Romantic painters returned to primitive art, one would have to reconstitute the whole universe of reference of the pupils of David, with their long beards and Greek costumes, who, 'outdoing their master's cult of antiquity, wanted to go back to Homer, the Bible and Ossian, and condemned the style of classical antiquity itself as "rococo", "Van Loo" or "Pompadour"'.<sup>42</sup> This would lead one back to the inextricably ethical and aesthetic alternatives—such as the identification of the naive with the pure and the natural—in terms of which their choices were made and which have nothing in common with the transhistorical oppositions beloved of formalist aesthetics.<sup>43</sup>

But the celebrant's or devotee's intention is not that of understanding, and, in the ordinary routine of the cult of the work of art, the play of academic or urbane references has no other function than to bring the work into an interminable circuit of inter-legitimation, so that a reference to Jan Breughel's *Bouquet of Flowers* lends dignity to Jean-Michel Picart's *Bouquet of Flowers with Parrot*, just as, in another context, reference to the latter can, being less common, serve to enhance the former. This play of cultured allusions and analogies endlessly pointing to other analogies, which, like the cardinal oppositions in mythical or ritual systems, never have to justify themselves by stating the basis of the relating which they perform, weaves around the works a complex web of factitious experiences, each answering and reinforcing all the others, which *creates* the enchantment of artistic contemplation. It is the source of the 'idolatry' to which Proust refers, which leads one to find 'an actress's robe or a society woman's dress beautiful . . . not because the cloth is beautiful but because it is the cloth painted by Moreau or described by Balzac.'<sup>44</sup>

Analogy, functioning as a circular mode of thought, makes it possible to tour the whole area of art and luxury *without ever leaving it*. Thus Château Margaux wine can be described with the same words as are used to describe the château, just as others will evoke Proust apropos of Monet or César Franck, which is a good way of talking about neither: 'The house is in the image of the vintage. Noble, austere, even a little solemn. . . . Château Margaux has the air of an ancient temple devoted to the cult of wine. . . . Vineyard or dwelling, Margaux disdains all embellishments. But just as the wine has to be served before it unfolds all its charms, so the residence waits for the visitor to enter before it reveals its own. In each case the same words spring to one's lips: elegance, distinction, delicacy and that subtle satisfaction given by something which has received the most attentive and indeed loving care for generations. A wine long matured, a house long inhabited: Margaux the vintage and Margaux the château are the product of two equally rare things: *rigour and time*.'<sup>45</sup>

**DISTANCE FROM NECESSITY** To explain the correlation between educational capital and the propensity or at least the aspiration to appreciate a work 'independently of its content', as the culturally most ambitious respondents put it, and more generally the propensity to make the 'gratuitous' and 'disinterested' investments demanded by legitimate works, it is not sufficient to point to the fact that schooling provides the linguistic tools and the references which enable aesthetic experience to be expressed and to be constituted by being expressed. What is in fact affirmed in this relationship is the dependence of the aesthetic disposition on the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application and also of the accumulation of a cultural capital (whether or not educationally sanctioned) which can

only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity. The aesthetic disposition which tends to bracket off the nature and function of the object represented and to exclude any 'naïve' reaction—horror at the horrible, desire for the desirable, pious reverence for the sacred—along with all purely ethical responses, in order to concentrate solely upon the mode of representation, the style, perceived and appreciated by comparison with other styles, is one dimension of a total relation to the world and to others, a life-style, in which the effects of particular conditions of existence are expressed in a 'misrecognizable' form.<sup>46</sup> These conditions of existence, which are the precondition for all learning of legitimate culture, whether implicit and diffuse, as domestic cultural training generally is, or explicit and specific, as in scholastic training, are characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies, which is the basis of objective and subjective distance from groups subjected to those determinisms.

To be able to play the games of culture with the playful seriousness which Plato demanded, a seriousness without the 'spirit of seriousness', one has to belong to the ranks of those who have been able, not necessarily to make their whole existence a sort of children's game, as artists do, but at least to maintain for a long time, sometimes a whole lifetime, a child's relation to the world. (All children start life as baby bourgeois, in a relation of magical power over others and, through them, over the world, but they grow out of it sooner or later.) This is clearly seen when, by an accident of social genetics, into the well-policed world of intellectual games there comes one of those people (one thinks of Rousseau or Chernyshevsky) who bring inappropriate stakes and interests into the games of culture; who get so involved in the game that they abandon the margin of neutralizing distance that the *illusio* (belief in the game) demands; who treat intellectual struggles, the object of so many pathetic manifestos, as a simple question of right and wrong, life and death. This is why the logic of the game has already assigned them rôles—eccentric or boor—which they will *play* despite themselves in the eyes of those who know how to stay within the bounds of the intellectual illusion and who cannot see them any other way.

The aesthetic disposition, a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art. In other words, it presupposes the distance from the world (of which the 'rôle distance' brought to light by Erving Goffman is a particular case) which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world. Contrary to what certain mechanistic theories would suggest, even in its most specifically artistic dimension

the pedagogic action of the family and the school operates at least as much through the economic and social conditions which are the precondition of its operation as through the contents which it inculcates.<sup>47</sup> The scholastic world of regulated games and exercise for exercise' sake is, at least in this respect, less remote than it might appear from the 'bourgeois' world and the countless 'disinterested' and 'gratuitous' acts which go to make up its distinctive rarity, such as home maintenance and decoration, occasioning a daily squandering of care, time and labour (often through the intermediary of servants), walking and tourism, movements without any other aim than physical exercise and the symbolic appropriation of a world reduced to the status of a landscape, or ceremonies and receptions, pretexts for a display of ritual luxuries, décors, conversations and finery, not to mention, of course, artistic practices and enjoyments. It is not surprising that bourgeois adolescents, who are both economically privileged and (temporarily) excluded from the reality of economic power, sometimes express their distance from the bourgeois world which they cannot really appropriate by a refusal of complicity whose most refined expression is a propensity towards aesthetics and aestheticism. In this respect they share common ground with the women of the bourgeoisie, who, being partially excluded from economic activity, find fulfilment in stage-managing the décor of bourgeois existence, when they are not seeking refuge or revenge in aesthetics.

Economic power is first and foremost a power to keep economic necessity at arm's length. This is why it universally asserts itself by the destruction of riches, conspicuous consumption, squandering, and every form of *gratuitous* luxury. Thus, whereas the court aristocracy made the whole of life a continuous spectacle, the bourgeoisie has established the opposition between what is paid for and what is free, the interested and the disinterested, in the form of the opposition, which Weber saw as characterizing it, between place of work and place of residence, working days and holidays, the outside (male) and the inside (female), business and sentiment, industry and art, the world of economic necessity and the world of artistic freedom that is snatched, by economic power, from that necessity.

Material or symbolic consumption of works of art constitutes one of the supreme manifestations of *ease*, in the sense both of objective leisure and subjective facility.<sup>48</sup> The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be separated from a general disposition towards the 'gratuitous' and the 'disinterested', the paradoxical product of a negative economic conditioning which, through facility and freedom, engenders distance vis-à-vis necessity. At the same time, the aesthetic disposition is defined, objectively and subjectively, in relation to other dispositions. Objective distance from necessity and from those trapped within it combines with a conscious distance which doubles freedom by exhibiting it. As the objective distance from necessity grows, life-style increasingly becomes the product of what Weber calls a 'stylization of life', a systematic commitment

which orients and organizes the most diverse practices—the choice of a vintage or a cheese or the decoration of a holiday home in the country. This affirmation of power over a dominated necessity always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies. The tastes of freedom can only assert themselves as such in relation to the tastes of necessity, which are thereby brought to the level of the aesthetic and so defined as vulgar. This claim to aristocracy is less likely to be contested than any other, because the relation of the ‘pure’, ‘disinterested’ disposition to the conditions which make it possible, i.e., the material conditions of existence which are rarest because most freed from economic necessity, has every chance of passing unnoticed. The most ‘classifying’ privilege thus has the privilege of appearing to be the most natural one.

THE AESTHETIC SENSE AS THE SENSE OF DISTINCTION Thus, the aesthetic disposition is one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others which presupposes objective assurance and distance. It is one manifestation of the system of dispositions produced by the social conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence when they take the paradoxical form of the greatest freedom conceivable, at a given moment, with respect to the constraints of economic necessity. But it is also a distinctive expression of a privileged position in social space whose distinctive value is objectively established in its relationship to expressions generated from different conditions. Like every sort of taste, it unites and separates. Being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others. And it distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others.

Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.<sup>49</sup> In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation;<sup>50</sup> and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others. ‘De gustibus non est disputandum’: not because ‘tous les goûts sont dans la nature’, but because each taste feels itself to be natural—and so it almost is, being a habitus—which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious. Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes; class endogamy is evidence of this. The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the

sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness.<sup>51</sup> The artist's life-style is always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois life-style, which it seeks to condemn as unreal and even absurd, by a sort of practical demonstration of the emptiness of the values and powers it pursues. The neutralizing relation to the world which defines the aesthetic disposition potentially implies a subversion of the spirit of seriousness required by bourgeois investments. Like the visibly ethical judgements of those who lack the means to make art the basis of their art of living, to see the world and other people through literary reminiscences and pictorial references, the 'pure' and purely aesthetic judgements of the artist and the aesthete spring from the dispositions of an ethos;<sup>52</sup> but because of the legitimacy which they command so long as their relationship to the dispositions and interests of a group defined by strong cultural capital and weak economic capital remains unrecognized, they provide a sort of absolute reference point in the necessarily endless play of mutually self-relativizing tastes. By a paradoxical reversal, they thereby help to legitimate the bourgeois claim to 'natural distinction' as difference made absolute.

Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one's position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept. It goes without saying that the social classes are not equally inclined and prepared to enter this game of refusal and counter-refusal; and that the strategies aimed at transforming the basic dispositions of a life-style into a system of aesthetic principles, objective differences into elective distinctions, passive options (constituted externally by the logic of the distinctive relationships) into conscious, elective choices are in fact reserved for members of the dominant class, indeed the very top bourgeoisie, and for artists, who as the inventors and professionals of the 'stylization of life' are alone able to make their art of living one of the fine arts. By contrast, the entry of the petite bourgeoisie into the game of distinction is marked, *inter alia*, by the anxiety of exposing oneself to classification by offering to the taste of others such infallible indices of personal taste as clothes or furniture, even a simple pair of armchairs, as in one of Nathalie Sarraute's novels. As for the working classes, perhaps their sole function in the system of aesthetic positions is to serve as a foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations.<sup>53</sup> Ignoring or ignorant of manner and style, the 'aesthetic' (in itself) of the working classes and culturally most deprived fractions of the middle classes defines as 'nice', 'pretty', 'lovely' (rather than 'beautiful') things that are already defined as



such in the 'aesthetic' of calendars and postcards: a sunset, a little girl playing with a cat, a folk dance, an old master, a first communion, a children's procession. The striving towards distinction comes in with petit-bourgeois aestheticism, which delights in all the cheap substitutes for chic objects and practices—driftwood and painted pebbles, cane and raffia, 'art' handicrafts and art photography.

This aestheticism defines itself against the 'aesthetic' of the working classes, refusing their favourite subjects, the themes of 'views', such as mountain landscapes, sunsets and woods, or souvenir photos, such as the first communion, the monument or the old master (see figure 2). In photography, this taste prefers objects that are close to those of the popular aesthetic but semi-neutralized by more or less explicit reference to a pictorial tradition or by a visible stylistic intention combining the human picturesque (weaver at his loom, tramps quarrelling, folk dance) with gratuitous form (pebbles, rope, tree bark).

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Technicians seem to offer the purest form of 'middle-brow' taste. Their tastes in photography locate them centrally in the structure of the middle classes (see figure 2), with the craftsmen, small shopkeepers, clerical workers and junior executives inclining towards the working class and the primary teachers and new petit bourgeois inclining towards the upper classes. They are particularly drawn to the objects most typical of middle-brow photography—the weaver, the still life—whereas the new petit bourgeois prefer objects which they see as lying outside the repertoire of the traditional aesthetic and therefore more 'original' (rope, cabbages), and also those belonging to the 'social picturesque' (tramps quarrelling).

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It is significant that this middle-brow art par excellence finds one of its preferred subjects in one of the spectacles most characteristic of middle-brow culture (along with the circus, light opera and bull-fights), the folk dance (which is particularly appreciated by skilled workers and foremen, junior executives, clerical and commercial employees) (C.S. VII). Like the photographic recording of the social picturesque, whose populist objectivism distances the lower classes by constituting them as an object of contemplation or even commiseration or indignation, the spectacle of the 'people' making a spectacle of itself, as in folk dancing, is an opportunity to experience the relationship of distant proximity, in the form of the idealized vision purveyed by aesthetic realism and populist nostalgia, which is a basic element in the relationship of the petite bourgeoisie to the working or peasant classes and their traditions. But this middle-brow aestheticism in turn serves as a foil to the most alert members of the new middle-class fractions, who reject its favoured subjects, and to the secondary teachers whose aestheticism (the aestheticism of consumers, since they are relatively infrequent practitioners of photography and the other arts) purports to be able to treat any object aesthetically, with the excep-

**Figure 2** The aesthetic disposition in the petite bourgeoisie (the various objects are ranked for each class fraction according to the percentage saying they would make a beautiful photo).

	Independent crafts- men, shopkeepers	Clerical, junior admin. executives	Technicians	Primary teachers	New petite bourgeoisie
Most choices	sunset landscape folk dance girl with cat woman breast-feeding weaver first communion old master famous monument still life bark of tree pregnant woman metal structure snake tramps' quarrel wounded man scrap-yard rope cabbages butcher's stall car crash	sunset landscape folk dance girl with cat woman breast-feeding old master still life first communion bark monument weaver snake metal structure pregnant woman cabbages tramps' quarrel rope butcher's stall scrap-yard wounded man car crash	sunset landscape girl with cat woman breast-feeding weaver folk dance still life bark snake first communion monument metal structure old master scrap-yard rope pregnant woman cabbages tramps' quarrel wounded man butcher's stall car crash	sunset woman breast-feeding girl with cat landscape bark weaver folk dance snake pregnant woman monument still life metal structure rope old master scrap-yard tramps' quarrel cabbages butcher's stall wounded man first communion car crash	sunset landscape woman breast-feeding girl with cat bark weaver still life folk dance rope snake old master cabbages pregnant woman metal structure tramps' quarrel monument first communion scrap-yard butcher's stall wounded man car crash
Fewest					

tion of those so constituted by the middle-brow art of the petite bourgeoisie (such as the weaver and the folk dance, which are deemed merely 'interesting').<sup>54</sup> These would-be aesthetes demonstrate by their distinctive refusals that they possess the practical mastery of the relationships between objects and groups which is the basis of all judgements of the type 'Ça fait' ('It looks . . .') ('Ça fait petit-bourgeois', 'Ça fait nouveau riche' etc.), without being able to go so far as to ascribe beauty to the most marked objects of the popular aesthetic (first communion) or the petit-bourgeois aesthetic (mother and child, folk dance) which the relations of structural proximity spontaneously lead them to detest.

Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-à-vis lower groups, such as, for intellectuals, the primary teachers' Brassens, Jean Ferrat or Ferré. Thus the song, as a cultural property which (like photography) is almost universally accessible and genuinely common (since hardly anyone is not exposed at one moment or another to the 'successes' of the day), calls for particular vigilance from those who intend to mark their difference. The intellectuals, artists and higher-education teachers seem to hesitate between systematic refusal of what can only be, at best, a middle-brow art, and a selective acceptance which manifests the universality of their culture and their aesthetic disposition.<sup>55</sup> For their part, the employers and professionals, who have little interest in the 'intellectual' song, indicate their distance from ordinary songs by rejecting with disgust the most popular and most 'vulgar' singers, such as Les Compagnons de la Chanson, Mireille Mathieu, Adamo or Sheila, and making an exception for the oldest and most consecrated singers (like Edith Piaf or Charles Trénet) or those closest to operetta and bel canto. But it is the middle classes who find in song (as in photography) an opportunity to manifest their artistic pretension by refusing the favourite singers of the working classes, such as Mireille Mathieu, Adamo, Charles Aznavour or Tino Rossi, and declaring their preference for the singers who endeavour to dignify this 'minor' genre. That is why the primary teachers distinguish themselves most clearly from the other fractions of the petite bourgeoisie in this area, where, more easily than in the domain of legitimate art, they can invest their academic dispositions and assert their own taste in the choice of singers who offer populist poetry in the primary-school tradition, such as Jacques Douai or Brassens (who was on the syllabus of the Saint-Cloud entrance examination a few years ago).<sup>56</sup>

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In addition to the data provided by the survey question, use was also made of the findings of a survey by the opinion research department of the

French broadcasting service (ORTF) (C.S. XIX) and of thirty in-depth interviews designed to grasp the constellation of preferences and refusals in conditions as close as possible to ordinary conversation. These interviews confirmed that, as the ORTF survey also shows, the more strongly a singer is preferred by the less cultivated, the more he or she is refused by the most cultivated—whose tastes in this area are almost exclusively expressed in rejections. These refusals, almost always expressed in the mode of distaste, are often accompanied by pitying or indignant remarks about the corresponding tastes ('I can't understand how anyone can like that!').

Similarly, one finds that the declining *petite-bourgeoisie* systematically rejects the virtues that the new *petite bourgeoisie* most readily claims for itself (witty, refined, stylish, artistic, imaginative); whereas the latter signals its aesthetic pretension by a refusal of the most typically 'bourgeois' configurations and by a concern to go against common judgements, in which aesthetic commitments figure prominently. Thus, when asked to state the ideal qualities of a friend or a domestic interior, they produce motley combinations such as: 'artistic, sociable, amusing, comfortable, easy to maintain, imaginative' (sales representative, Paris), 'dynamic, pragmatic, stylish, studied, warm, imaginative' (gallery director, Lille), 'dynamic, refined, pragmatic, comfortable, harmonious, cosy' (radio presenter, Lille). It is again a similar process that leads the members of the professions to distinguish themselves from newcomers to the bourgeoisie by rejecting the qualities of ambition and upward mobility, such as 'pragmatic', 'dynamic' (often chosen by managerial executives), or the most 'pretentious' adjectives, such as 'stylish' or 'refined', which are much favoured by the new *petite bourgeoisie*.

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It may also be assumed that the affirmation of the omnipotence of the aesthetic gaze found among higher-education teachers, the group most inclined to say that all the objects mentioned could make a beautiful photograph and to profess their recognition of modern art or of the artistic status of the photograph, stems much more from a self-distinguishing intention than from a true aesthetic universalism. This has not escaped the most knowing avant-garde producers, who carry sufficient authority to challenge, if need be, the very dogma of the omnipotence of art,<sup>57</sup> and are in a position to recognize this faith as a defensive manoeuvre to avoid self-exposure by reckless refusals: 'Who would say this: "When I look at a picture, I'm not interested in what it represents"? Nowadays, the sort of people who don't know much about art. Saying that is typical of someone who hasn't any idea about art. Twenty years ago, I'm not even sure that twenty years ago the abstract painters would have said that; I don't think so. It's exactly what a guy says when he hasn't a clue: "I'm not one of these old fogies, I know what counts is whether it's pretty"' (avant-garde painter, age 35). They alone, at all events, can afford the audacious imposture of refusing all refusals by recuperating, in parody or sublimation, the very objects refused by the lower-degree aestheticism. The 'rehabilitation' of 'vulgar' objects is more risky, but also more 'profitable', the smaller the distance in social space or time, and the 'horrors'

of popular kitsch are easier to 'recuperate' than those of petit-bourgeois imitation, just as the 'abominations' of bourgeois taste can begin to be found 'amusing' when they are sufficiently dated to cease to be 'compromising'.

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Suffice it to point out that, in addition to those subjects which had already been constituted as aesthetic at the time of the survey, either by a pictorial tradition (e.g., the metal frame of Léger or Gromaire, the tramps quarrelling, a variant of an old theme of realist painting often taken up in photography, or the butcher's stall), or by the photographic tradition (e.g., the weaver, the folk dance, the bark), most of the 'banal' subjects have subsequently been constituted aesthetically by one avant-garde painter or another (for example, the sunset over the sea, by Richer, who paints typically romantic landscapes from photographs, or Long and Fulton, English painters who make 'conceptual' landscape photographs, or even Land Art; or the car crash, by Andy Warhol; or the tramps' quarrel, with the 'tramps sleeping in the Bowery' of the American hyper-realists; or the first communion, by Boltanski, who has even given artistic status to the family album etc.). The only 'unrecuperated' and, for the moment, 'irrecuperable' subjects are the favourite themes of first-degree aestheticism, the weaver at his loom, the folk dance, the tree-bark, and the woman suckling a child. They are too close to favour the flaunting of an absolute power of aesthetic constitution; and because they do not allow distance to be manifested, they are more liable to be mistaken for 'first-degree' intentions. Reappropriation is that much more difficult when the aesthetic-in-itself which it works on clearly manifests recognition of the dominant aesthetic so that the distinctive deviation is liable to go unnoticed.

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The artist agrees with the 'bourgeois' in one respect: he prefers naivety to 'pretentiousness'. The essential merit of the 'common people' is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the 'petit bourgeois'. Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of artists and intellectuals, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes lead them back to 'popular' tastes and opinions, the 'people' so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy.

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In fact, their 'pretension' leaves the petit bourgeois particularly disarmed in the less legitimate or not-yet legitimate domains which the cultural 'elite' abandon to them, whether in photography or in cinema, in which their ambitions are often expressed (as is shown, for example, in the fact that the gap between the petite bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie is much less wide regarding knowledge of cinema directors than of composers). The new-style petit bourgeois, who, confronted with objectively ranked judgements, are able to choose the 'right' answer, are almost as disarmed as the working