



ARTICLE

Fields of Fashion

Critical insights into Bourdieu's sociology of culture

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Abstract. Bourdieu's sociology of culture has been central to studies of consumption. However, although it offers rich insights into his sociology of cultural production and consumption, his work in the field of fashion has been little discussed. This article explores some of Bourdieu's main ideas, namely the notions of field and subfield, the concept of transubstantiation, that of symbolic production, and the idea of a dialectic of distinction–pretension. It is argued that Bourdieu does not pay enough attention to the materiality of material culture whose meaningfulness he discusses only as symbolic. He also fails to reflect on the significance of mass fashion – whether symbolic or sensual – and the influence it has had on the field of high fashion, hence ignoring the theoretical implications of such influence. In his work, the discrepancies between empirical reality and his conceptual framework are minimized.

Key words

distinction • field of fashion • mass fashion • material culture • transubstantiation

ALTHOUGH BOURDIEU'S CONCEPTUAL TOOLS HAVE OFTEN BEEN APPROPRIATED BY STUDENTS OF FASHION (see, e.g., Entwistle, 2000; McRobbie, 1998), his own work in this field – 'Haute Couture and Haute Culture' (Bourdieu, 1995a), 'Le Couturier et sa Griffe' (Bourdieu, 1975), and parts of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1996a) – has been little discussed. This article attempts to fill this gap, paying particular attention to the issue of the consumption of fashion.

Because of the 'structural homology' that Bourdieu (1995a: 132) says

exists between the different fields of luxury goods such as poetry or high fashion, he argues that whenever he is talking about *haut couture*, he could just as well be talking about high culture. His analysis of the field of fashion, he implies, constitutes a case study of his sociology of culture and, for this reason, is of equal interest in understanding his work, including his more extensive discussion of, for example, the field of art (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1996c). His interest in analysing the logic of the field of fashion, just as the field of art or more recently the field of production of 'maisons individuelles' (Bourdieu, 2000), certainly matched his desire to unravel the 'general laws of fields' and to show the validity of his theoretical model. As Bourdieu (1995b) stresses:

. . . fields as different as the field of politics, the field of philosophy or the field of religion have invariant laws of functioning. (That is why the project of a general theory is not unreasonable and why, even now, we can use what we learn about the functioning of each particular field to question and interpret other fields, so moving beyond the deadly antinomy of monographic idiography and formal, empty theory). (p. 72)

None of the studies which might appear marginal to his work, such as his discussion of the production and consumption of fashion, are truly marginal. Rather, they all form part of a sociological framework in which Bourdieu has attempted to refine new conceptual tools for an understanding of the working of fields of culture. In this respect, insights into his discussion of the field of fashion can provide invaluable insights into his sociology of cultural consumption and production, as I demonstrate in this article.

Bourdieu's sociology of the field of high fashion draws on the conceptual tools central to his thought – capital, distinction, position and struggle. However, it also repeats a weakness of this sociology; it fails to account for the significance of mass culture (here mass fashion) for processes of cultural production and consumption, which are reduced to social class differentiation and the expression of strategies of distinction. Thus, Bourdieu's discussion of the field of fashion is a case study of his work.

Bourdieu's work has been central to studies of consumption, not least for its insights into 'the cultural nature of consumption' (Slater, 1997: 159) and for the way the consumption of 'culture', in the restricted sense of the term, is linked to the consumption of 'culture' in its anthropological sense; or, as Bourdieu (1996a) puts it, 'the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food'

(p. 1). Bourdieu has shown ‘how crucial consumption patterns have become in the development of socio-cultural identities’ (Bocock, 1995: 94), most significantly by focusing on ‘the dynamics of taste’ (Lury, 1999: 81) and the logic of the practice of consumption. He also paid attention early in his career to the consumption of everyday objects such as fashion – objects which had for long been ignored by academics but whose study provides rich insights into contemporary patterns of consumption. However, like many studies of consumption (see, e.g., Baudrillard, 1972; McKendrick, 1982; Veblen, 1994), Bourdieu’s work has also shown some difficulties overcoming its fixation on status differentiation and on the role of objects as signs. The materiality of the objects engaged in processes of consumption has been taken over by their symbolic dimension, resulting in a mechanistic account of material culture, which excludes any discussion of the sensual significance of mass culture, here mass fashion, in agents’ lives.

After a discussion of some of the main concepts which inform Bourdieu’s sociology of the field of fashion, I comment on his neglect of mass fashion and of its complex and varied relations to high fashion. I then turn to his notion of ‘symbolic production’ of culture (Bourdieu, 1993a: 37), arguing for its relevance to the field of popular fashion. Finally, I comment on his account of the consumption of fashion in terms of a dialectic of distinction–pretension which excludes the working class and its ‘taste for necessity’ (Bourdieu, 1996a: 374).

DEFINING THE FIELD OF FASHION

In ‘Le Couturier et sa Griffé’ (1975), Bourdieu studies the structure of the French field of high fashion. This field is defined by the unequal distribution of specific capital amongst the different couture houses, ‘specific’ meaning ‘that this capital is effective *in relation to* a particular field, and therefore within the limits of that field’ (p. 73). Although Bourdieu does not use the expression, the specific capital at play in the field of high fashion could be called fashion capital, which ‘consists essentially of familiarity with a certain milieu and of the quality conferred by the simple fact of belonging to it’ (p. 16). The designers who left famous couture houses to create their own companies, such as Yves Saint Laurent, are endowed with an ‘initial capital of specific authority’ (p. 16) which they owe to their former stay in established couture houses such as that of Dior, whose capital is both symbolic and economic; it is a capital of prestige, legitimacy and high turnover.

Just like the field of high culture, members of the field of high fashion – Bourdieu also calls them ‘players’ (1995a: 133) – occupy different positions. In the dominant position ‘are the designers who possess in the

highest degree the power to define objects as rare by means of their signature, their label, those whose label has the highest price' (p. 133), that is, those whose fashion capital is high. They are opposed to those who are less endowed with the specific capital, the 'pretenders' (Bourdieu, 1975: 12).

New designers and dominant designers are located on two opposite sides of the field. Here Bourdieu (1975), drawing on an analogy with the field of politics, argues that the field of high fashion has a left and a right wing (p. 7). On the left are the newcomers, such as Paco Rabanne and Ungaro; on the right are the old consecrated *couturiers* such as Balmain and Dior. There is also a centre occupied by designers like Saint Laurent. Linked to these positions is an opposition between geographical spaces as 'reified social space[s]' (Bourdieu, 1993b: 160): whereas Balmain and Dior are located on Paris's right bank – the old bourgeois area – Rabanne and Ungaro are on the left bank – the avant-garde bank. Left and right wings are also characterized by opposed strategies of struggle (an invariant of fields): subversion in the case of newcomers and conservation in that of the dominant *couturiers*. Thus the strategies followed by the institutions of production and diffusion of high fashion in their struggle to attain the dominant position that reflect their position in the field of high fashion (Bourdieu, 1975: 7).

Pretenders seek to devalue the specific capital set by the established *couturiers* – 'the possessors of legitimacy' (Bourdieu, 1995a: 134) – by defining new values for the legitimation of a new specific capital, that is, 'for the exclusive power to constitute and impose the symbols of legitimate distinction on the subject of clothes' (Bourdieu, 1975: 15). New entrants 'as in boxing, the challenger, decide the direction of the game'. They try to unsettle dominant *couturiers*, who in contrast 'play safe' (p. 9). Whilst in the literary field the definition of the writer is one of the main stakes over which members fight (Bourdieu, 1993a), in the field of high fashion, it is the definition of the designer.

SUBFIELD OF LARGE-SCALE PRODUCTION AND SUBFIELD OF RESTRICTED PRODUCTION

The field of cultural production, Bourdieu (1993a: 53) argues, is divided into the subfield of large-scale production and the subfield of restricted production. The latter is an autonomous field where high cultural goods such as art, literature or high fashion are produced by and for producers, and addressed to a limited audience. The pursuit of financial profit is rejected and 'art for art's sake' is the dominant value (p. 127). The field of large-scale production, on the other hand, a 'discredited' field Bourdieu

argues (p. 39), caters for a wide audience, and its market is what is referred to as “‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture’ (p. 16). Dependent on the laws of the market, it is structured by its producers’ quest for commercial success.

The two subfields are organized around ‘a dualist structure’ (Bourdieu, 1996c: 113) based on opposing criteria, which are internal to the functioning of each field and different from the criteria at play in the other field (Bourdieu, 1993a: 115). The two subfields, Bourdieu notes, ‘coexist’ (p. 128). They do not overlap, as demonstrated by the series of contrasts he makes between them; whilst the subfield of large-scale production is characterized by its producers’ ‘search for effect . . . on the public’, in the subfield of restricted production, he argues, the ‘cult of form for its own sake’ is favoured (p. 127). In restricted production, ‘the cynicism of submission to the market’ reigns, whilst in large-scale production it is ‘the idealism of devotion to art’ (p. 128). ‘Profane’ goods are produced in the former, ‘sacred’ ones (p. 129) in the latter. ‘Worldly success’ (p. 101) and ‘the widest possible public’ (p. 126) are what producers of large-scale production seek, in contrast to the quest for ‘spiritual consecration’ (p. 101) sought by the producers of restricted production, a field for ‘privileged clients and competitors’ (p. 115).

Bourdieu (1996c) has extensively discussed the autonomization of the field of art and the split between subfields. However, he does not fully investigate what happens when this clear-cut distinction between the two subfields is blurred. Although he has argued that this division might be in the process of disappearing, the implications of this empirical reality for his theoretical model are minimized and his model is ultimately given a normative twist (see Bourdieu, 1996c: 345; for a comment on the normative dimension of his sociology, see Lahire, 1999c: 12; Brown and Szeman, 2000: 8–9).

Throughout his work, Bourdieu often registers examples that might appear to question the systematic relevance of his sociological model (see also Hall, 1992: 259; Swartz, 1997: 183 for a similar comment on Bourdieu and class structure). However, as Martucelli (1999) argues, ‘in spite of a few considerations, these discrepancies, although frequent in his work, are always presented as minor or passing’ (p. 126). Bourdieu (1996b) brilliantly exposes the logic of doxic thought – the ‘uncontested acceptance of the daily life-world’ (p. 73) – but ultimately the very principles which structure it, here the dichotomies art/ commerce, high culture/ mass culture, remain unchallenged. Mass culture is conceived as clearly distinct from high culture and ends up being given little theoretical and empirical attention (see Lemieux, 1999, for a comment on Bourdieu’s discourse on the mass media). It is even

derided as alienating (Bourdieu, 1996a: 386; see also Wilson, 1988; Fowler, 1997). Similarly, very few passages in the whole of his work are devoted to mass fashion. It is not fashion he analyses but the subfield of restricted production and consumption of fashion, that is, high fashion.

Bourdieu (1996a), in contrasting high fashion with mass fashion, a 'popularization' (p. 250) of the former, notes that the two, like high culture and low culture, 'only exist through each other, and it is their relation, or better, the objective collaboration of their respective production apparatuses which produces the acknowledging [*reconnaissance*] of culture's legitimacy, that is to say, cultural need' (Bourdieu, 1975: 34), a position he reiterates in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1996a: 250). However, Bourdieu reduces high fashion's relation to popular fashion to a relation of emulation of the former by the latter, as further discussed later in this article, hence failing to explore the many ways through which they 'exist through each other'.

There are many instances in the field of contemporary fashion when high fashion and popular fashion are intricately related and when the boundaries that separate them become fuzzy. As Elzingre (1996) argues, if luxury fashion in its early days was the concern of a narrow public, it has become increasingly addressed to a wide market. Consuming high fashion does not consist solely of buying high-fashion clothes, but also concerns consuming images of luxury fashion, to the point where high fashion has become 'an art which carries along popular fervour' (p. 46).

In her discussion of the field of art, Zolberg (1997: 189) stresses that artists often cross over art-world barriers and the dividing line between popular and high art. Similarly, there are many fashion designers who have transgressed the line between high and popular fashion by designing collections for the mass market, such as Ribeiro for Dorothy Perkins, and John Rocha for Debenhams in the UK.

When Bourdieu wrote *Le Couturier*, the structure of the French field of fashion certainly was different from what it is now. However, first, the practice of transgression of the boundary between high fashion and popular fashion described earlier had already begun in 1970, as Grumbach (1993: 144) demonstrates, with the collaboration between designers like Ungaro and Saint Laurent, and the magazine *Elle*, which allowed readers to obtain *couturier* clothes at low prices. This practice quickly attracted many *couturiers* (Grumbach, 1993: 144), drawing attention to the fact that popular fashion already exerted a determining influence on the field of high fashion (see also Du Roselle, 1980). Second, although his work on fashion was mainly written in the early 1970s, in later works – e.g., Bourdieu, 1993a, 1995c, 'Haute Couture et Haute Culture', was published in *Questions de*

Sociologie in 1980 – Bourdieu refers to his discussion of the field of fashion without commenting on the historical changes which have taken place since his first analysis of this field, changes which might have led him to revise or refine his theoretical framework.

This comment must be seen in the light of other comments that have been made on Bourdieu's work with regard to the issue of change and history (see, e.g., Calhoun, 1995: 66; Jenkins, 1996; Wilson, 1988). Although he stresses the importance of historical analysis, which he insightfully applies, for instance, to his discussion of the emergence of the pure aesthetic (Bourdieu, 1996c: 291), 'Bourdieu's predominant presentation', as Calhoun (1995) observes, nevertheless 'tends towards a trans-historical conceptual framework and analytic approach which partially obscures the specificity of epochs and types of society or culture' (pp. 66–7). Bourdieu himself has argued that 'one of the purposes of the analysis is to uncover *transhistorical invariants*, or sets of relations between structures that persist within a clearly circumscribed but relatively long historical period' (Bourdieu, 1996b: 78, quoted in Calhoun, 1995: 66). Had Bourdieu registered the rise of mass fashion and the blurring of the boundaries between high fashion and mass fashion, there is no reason to believe that this would have led him to question the overall structure of his sociological system. As argued earlier, his consideration of the 'discrepancies' between empirical reality and theory have little effect on his conceptual framework.

Bourdieu's failure to account for the growing role of mass fashion in the structuring of the field of fashion is an illustration of his failure to account for the role of mass culture in the structuring of the field of culture, a field which endlessly reproduces itself (see also Swartz, 1997: 211–17 for the problem of reproduction in Bourdieu's work). Thus although Bourdieu (1993a) observes that 'certain works of middle-brow art [such as westerns] may present formal characteristics predisposing them to enter into legitimate culture' (p. 128) – he does not theorize on the implications of such a legitimization to high culture and the traditional cultural hierarchy.

There exist many agents of consecration of culture – I return to this notion later – such as popular stars or fashion PRs, whose role is to legitimize not high culture but *popular* culture. Bourdieu (1996a) refers to such agents as the 'new cultural intermediaries' (p. 323), a rich analytical tool which has attracted the attention of many cultural analysts (see, e.g., Featherstone, 1994; McRobbie, 1998; Nixon, 1997). But, again, the power these intermediaries have and have had on the structure of the field of culture is not fully discussed and is ultimately minimized. As Wilson (1988: 57) puts it, 'Bourdieu dismisses them shortly':

. . . nothing could be less subversive than these controlled transgressions which are inspired by a concern to rehabilitate and ennoble when they are not simply the expression of a misplaced recognition of the hierarchies, as anarchic as it is eager. (Bourdieu, 1996a: 326)

The dominant culture is high culture, the dominant fashion is high fashion.

Thus fashion designers do transgress the line between high fashion and mass fashion. And this is where Bourdieu's analogy with sport encounters some limits; players in the field of fashion, unlike players in the field of sport, do move between fields. They are not ascribed one specific position or role, but participate in many simultaneous games whose rules might be different, though not necessarily incompatible. In Bourdieu's work, the fashion players situated in the subfield of high fashion are circumscribed by this field, their positions structured by this field alone as well as their relations to other high-fashion players. The variety of movements a player might make across fields, and the complex structuring of these movements by both the subfield of high fashion *and* the subfield of mass fashion, are not examined. Moreover, as in the field of art discussed by Zolberg (1997), themes and techniques 'may be "borrowed" and recombined in other contexts, and for other ends' (p. 190), which illustrates the constant movement existing between high and popular fashion and the transgression of the boundary between the two; the influence of street styles on high fashion is a case in point (see Polhemus, 1997).

High-fashion labels also epitomize this transgression. They embody two dimensions: the mass as well as the elite; high fashion *and* popular fashion. Within one single name – the label – the two subfields of fashion are united. The uniqueness of high fashion is reproduced in thousands while at the same time keeping its auratic appeal. High fashion – Courrèges, Ralph Lauren or Calvin Klein, and the same has been true of Dior for more than 50 years now (see Grumbach, 1993) – can thus be consumed via the multitude of 'derived products' (Grumbach, 1993: 105) such as bags, hosiery and tee-shirts, which all carry the high-fashion label and with it the values of exclusivity and luxury it encapsulates. Couture's prestige is shared through the diversity of affordable products that carry the name of designers, and are thereby invested with the high symbolic value of couture, which thus reaches a mass market.

The label, Bourdieu (1975) argues, operates a process of transsubstantiation of the material object to which it is applied, which then takes on the high value attached to the name (p. 21). The label does not change the

materiality of the product, but its social characteristic (p. 23). It is ‘the perceptible manifestation – like the signature of a painter – of a transfer of symbolic value’ (p. 22). Bourdieu, however, does not theorize the implications of such a process for the clear-cut distinction which emerges in his work between the subfield of high fashion and that of mass fashion: two subfields which, within the label, become merged into one single field, that of mass high fashion.

Jobling (1999) illustrates such a merging in his analysis of the magazine *The Face*, pointing to its mixing of street style with high fashion. The aim of the founders of *The Face*, he notes, ‘was to emulate the look and production values of the glossy fashion magazines while breaking away from their more hidebound and exclusive convention of lionising *haute couture*’ (p. 35). In that respect, the fashion produced by this magazine – for Bourdieu such an institution is as much a producer of fashion as the designer, an issue I develop next – is situated neither in mass fashion nor in high fashion but in a space made up of both:

Thus in the October 1982 issue the leading editorial portrayed the magazine as a kind of chrysalis, and underscored its transitional status by tentatively inquiring whether *The Face* was ‘a downmarket arts journal, or an upmarket music magazine’.
(Jobling, 1999: 36)

Such a transitional status is left at the periphery of Bourdieu’s analytical framework.

THE SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION OF FASHION: A PROCESS OF TRANSSUBSTANTIATION

I have looked at some of the main characteristics of the field of fashion. The players I have discussed are its direct producers – designers. However, Bourdieu (1993a) argues that designers are only one type of producer amongst many, since the material production of cultural objects is only one side of their production. Another side is symbolic production, ‘the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work’ (p. 37). Symbolic production aims at ‘ensuring the ontologic promotion and the transsubstantiation’ (Bourdieu, 1975: 28) of the product of material creation. The creation of the fashion label is an example of such a process of transsubstantiation (p. 23).

Discourses on cultural objects are also a feature of this process of transsubstantiation. They ‘are among the social conditions of production of the work of art *qua* object of belief’ (Bourdieu, 1993a: 35). A variety of

institutions such as museums or magazines – Bourdieu also calls them ‘institutions of diffusion or consecration’ (p. 133) – are involved in this process of symbolic production. Thus:

. . . the life of the artist, the cut ear of Van Gogh and the suicide of Modigliani are as much part of the work of these painters as their canvases which owe them a part of their value. (Bourdieu, 1975: 28)

Similarly, in the field of fashion, the way designers decorate their houses, their life and lifestyle, as depicted by fashion magazines, enter the objects of material production to invest them with symbolic value and become an integral part of the fashion these designers produce (pp. 10–11).

Fields, then, are organized around the specific forms of belief as to what constitutes cultural works and their value, beliefs which are also at work in the field of fashion. For example, it has been said that in the UK ‘fashion is a “popular thing” rather than an “elite” thing’ (McRobbie, 1998: 8), and that the ‘style and culture of British fashion design stands in stark contrast to the stuffy and conservative world’ of French haute couture (p. 79).

Bourdieu has brilliantly analysed the process of production of beliefs in the values of high culture (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1993a, 1996c) but he has not discussed the relevance of this process to popular culture and the production of popular cultural values and meanings. The notion of symbolic production is a conceptual tool invaluable to analyses of both the field of high culture *and* the field of popular culture. If, in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, for example – as I show elsewhere (Rocamora, 2001, 2002) – in accordance with Bourdieu, beliefs in high fashion as high culture are conveyed, in the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, it is fashion as popular culture which is valued. In both newspapers, stories are told which, just as the story of Van Gogh’s severed ear is an integral part of the artist’s work, play a significant part in the way the transsubstantiation of the material world of fashion creates beliefs in the value of fashion. In *Le Monde*, they are stories set in the fashion theatre and its dream world of imaginary beings. In *The Guardian*, they are stories that unfold around the catwalk and whose main characters are stars, with the performers of the fashion show providing popular entertainment.

These stars are ‘agents of legitimation’ and ‘instances of consecration’ (Bourdieu, 1993a: 121) of culture. However, they are not agents of legitimation of high culture, the type of legitimation Bourdieu is interested in, but of popular culture. They are its agents of ‘diffusion’ (p. 121) whose names *The Guardian* draws on and thereby further consecrates, hence

also further consecrating popular culture, in the same way that *Le Monde* draws on the names of painters and poets to consecrate fashion as high culture.

Celebrities add glamorous prestige to the dress they look at or wear. It is this same glamorous prestige that *The Guardian* draws on in reporting the names of stars, names which make events worthy of interest. The value found in what Douglas and Isherwood (1996) call ‘the enjoyment of sharing names’ turns the show into a pleasurable experience of fashion. They note: ‘goods are endowed with value by the agreement of fellow consumers’, adding, ‘enjoyment of physical consumption is only a part of the service yielded by goods: the other part is the enjoyment of sharing names’ (p. 51). Similarly, pleasure in the sharing of the names of high designers’ labels surely accounts for the interest in the consumption of the products which carry them.

In the same way that, following Bourdieu, material production is only one aspect of the production of cultural artefacts, material consumption is only one aspect of the consumption process. The other aspect is the symbolic consumption of goods. But whereas Douglas and Isherwood (1996) emphasize the enjoyment provided by symbolic consumption, Bourdieu concentrates on status competition, as I now explore.

BOURGEOIS CONSUMPTION OF FASHION

As the result of the homology between the position of designers in the field of fashion and the position of consumers in ‘the field of class relations’ (Bourdieu, 1993a: 38), producers and consumers of high fashion, Bourdieu (1975) argues, are spontaneously adjusted to each other. This adjustment is not the product of ‘conscious design’, but of ‘structural correspondence’ (Bourdieu, 1993a: 97). Thus, the dominant position of a designer within the field of fashion corresponds to the dominant position of consumers within the field of class relations. The old consecrated *couturiers* are structurally adjusted to the old bourgeoisie, whereas the new designers are structurally adjusted to the new bourgeoisie (Bourdieu, 1975: 30).

There is a similar homology between classes of products and classes of consumers (Bourdieu, 1975: 32–3). It is precisely because a cultural object is the objectification of the already ‘constituted taste’ of the producer (Bourdieu, 1996a: 231), homologous to the taste of his or her consumer, that it is spontaneously adjusted to the consumer’s demand. This already existing taste

... has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience, implicit or even

unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by a process of objectification which, in present circumstances, is almost always the work of professionals. (p. 231)

The objectified relationship between objects and consumers – the constituted taste – is mediated by ‘that sense of the homology between goods and groups which defines tastes’ (p. 232), assisted by a variety of institutions such as shops and magazines.

There is a homology, then, between producers, consumers and products, which explains why in the field of fashion, for example, according to Bourdieu (1975), the consecrated high fashion of the consecrated *couturiers* such as Balmain and Dior corresponds to ‘the women of a venerable age from the highest and most established fractions of the high bourgeoisie’ (p. 7), whilst avant-garde fashion is consumed by the new bourgeoisie.

The relation between consumption and production, however, is a complex interactive process, not simply one of structural homology between autonomous fields resulting in the unconscious adjustment of demand and offer as in Bourdieu’s model. Hebdige’s (1994) article on the motor scooter, as Miller (1987) suggests, offers a comprehensive alternative to this model. ‘There can be no absolute symmetry’, Hebdige (1994) notes, ‘between the “moments” of design/production and consumption/use’ (p. 80). Italian companies developed the scooter as a feminine answer to the motorbike, fabricating it as a gendered object both materially (it allowed women to wear skirts) but also symbolically, to borrow Bourdieu’s notion – through visual representations showing women rather than men riding it. It was, however, as Hebdige shows, appropriated differently by British youth such as the Mods, who used it to construct and express the values of their social groups. As Miller (1987) notes, ‘elements of intention’ (p. 170) are reintroduced in Hebdige’s analysis. Not only the intention of producers is reintroduced, but also that of consumers, consumers who, in Bourdieu’s work, have no opportunity to become creative agents, caught as they are in his model of automatic structural correspondence between consumption and production.

This is why the notion of homology which Bourdieu draws on to establish a structural link between production and consumption is questionable (see also Lahire, 1999a: 51); there is no place for the diversity of appropriations of the same product within one class, or across classes. The homology which Bourdieu says exists between consumers and goods cannot account for the consumption of non-avant-garde objects by the new

bourgeoisie. It is very unlikely that all the members of the new bourgeoisie consume avant-garde fashion and that avant-garde goods are consumed by the new bourgeoisie exclusively. Consumers of high fashion are also consumers of mass fashion and, as argued earlier, high fashion also enters mass markets through the transsubstantiating label.

Moreover in *Le Couturier*, the only avant-gardes Bourdieu (1993a) refers to are the designers, the direct producers of clothes. He has richly discussed the 'charismatic ideology' (p. 76) of the creators as sole authors of their work, pointing to the role of a variety of institutions and agents in the process of creation of the creators and their work (Bourdieu, 1995d). However, he pays attention to such producers and agents only as members of the field of production, not considering consumers as active makers of culture and cultural artefacts. Many fashions, however, have started outside of the fashion industry and were not the product of the subfield of high fashion and its producers only. I am thinking of trends which originate in youth and/or ethnic groups, for instance, and which are then appropriated by high-fashion designers, a process well documented by Polhemus (1997). The avant-garde in these cases is also to be found amongst groups whose members are unlikely to all be derived from the new bourgeoisie.

Bourdieu adheres to a restrictive definition of production and consumption, and does not put these categories into question (see also Kondo, 1997: 110). He conceptualizes the processes of production and consumption only as separate entities which deflect off each other and whose parts neatly correspond to each other in a system of homologies in which there is no room for the consumer–author, in contrast to the work of cultural theorists such as Willis (1996) or De Certeau (1988). Bourdieu (1996a) gives a mechanical account of the relationship between the consumption and production of fashion, a relationship which, as mentioned earlier, he defines as objectified in the 'finished product' (p. 231) of cultural production, and which he conceptualizes in terms of class only. As Miller (1987) observes, the notion of objectification Bourdieu draws on 'consists mainly in the external sedimentation and subsequent reproduction of class interests' (p. 156). The objectification in cultural forms of the homologies which Bourdieu believes exist between consumers, producers and products is nothing more than an objectification of processes of social class divisions. Bourdieu theorizes these divisions around the ideas of class pretension, distinction and necessity, hence leaving little room for the analysis of the diversity of projects involved in the consumption of fashion, such as, for instance, the pursuit of sensual pleasure, an issue I now discuss.

PRETENSION AND DISTINCTION: A BOURGEOIS DIALECTIC

Bourdieu (1975) distinguishes between bourgeois consumption (informed by a quest for distinction) and petit-bourgeois consumption (informed by pretension). The relation between distinction and pretension can be defined as being between ‘antagonistic and complementary dispositions’ (p. 35) that are both bourgeois and petit-bourgeois dispositions. Haute couture, for instance, is used by the bourgeoisie as a means of asserting its difference from pretenders, that is, petit-bourgeois. It ‘provides the dominant class with the symbolic signs of “class” which are, as one says, *de rigueur* in all exclusive ceremonies of the bourgeoisie’s self-worship, which is the celebration of its own distinction’ (p. 29). Fashion shows, Bourdieu notes, are part of such bourgeois ceremonies (p. 32). The petite bourgeoisie on the other hand is characterized by its pretension to be part of the high bourgeoisie: It is ‘committed to the symbolic . . . haunted by the look of others and endlessly occupied with being seen in a good light’ (Bourdieu, 1996a: 253). As for the working classes, they ‘do not have this concern with their being-for-others’ (p. 253).

The ‘dialectic of pretension and distinction’, Bourdieu (1995a) argues, is a constant of both the field of production and the field of consumption (pp. 135–6). In the field of fashion, for example,

. . . fashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference. An emblem of class (in all senses) withers once it loses its distinctive power. When the miniskirt reaches the mining villages of northern France, it’s time to start all over again. (p. 135)

The reduction of the price of fashion products corresponds to a degradation in time of their distinctive value, that is to the ‘fading away of their power of distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1975: 18), and it is because, according to Bourdieu, the value of a product is relational and not substantial that it can carry on exercising a distinctive power for a group lower in the social hierarchy than the group for which it no longer has this power. Fashion thrives on ‘the series of secondary uses of the *déclassé* to achieve *dassement*’ (p. 18).

However, Bourdieu’s model of emulation cannot alone account for preferences in fashion. Slater (1997), for instance, argues that emulation theories assume

. . . a rather mechanical view of hierarchies and the processes that maintain them and ignore the extent to which consumption styles can emerge from the internal resources and social

experiences of a subordinated social group and from their opposition (indeed, class struggle) to higher ranks. (p. 158)

I have already mentioned in the preceding section the fashion styles created by ethnic and youth groups that have trickled *up* the catwalk.

Crane (2000), in her recent study of class consumption of fashion, argues that if emulation theories such as Bourdieu's were relevant to an understanding of patterns of consumption up to 1875, they are no longer adequate for understanding fashion diffusion after this date. To reduce fashion consumption – or for that matter, in Bourdieu's work, cultural consumption more generally – to status distinction and social differentiation is to miss the variety and complexity of people's engagement with the objects of material culture, such as dress. Bourdieu's dialectic of distinction–pretension recalls Veblen's (1994) theory of 'conspicuous consumption', and similarly reduces objects to signifiers of difference. Lipovetsky (1994) has argued that such an approach fails to realize that 'consumption, by and large, is no longer an activity governed by the quest for social recognition; it is undertaken in an effort to achieve well-being, functionality, pleasure for its own sake' (p. 145). A multitude of projects are involved in cultural practices, projects such as those discussed by Lipovetsky and informed by a 'taste for autonomy' rather than social differentiation (p. 146), but also projects which engage the material dimension of the products consumed, a dimension Bourdieu does not consider.

The materiality of the fashion object is lost in Bourdieu's account of class consumption. The body is a mere carrier of clothes as expression of distinction or pretension, as if body and clothes were two separate entities whose convergence never creates a sensually meaningful whole. The physical body, a body that feels and experiences the material world, is discussed only in relation to working-class consumption (see Bourdieu, 1996a), as if physical engagement with cultural forms was a preserve of this class only. But Bourdieu discusses this body on an almost animal level (see also Gartman, 1991: 440), driven by a functional relation to objects. The bourgeois, on the other hand, seem to use their bodies as substanceless forms, tools for class distinction only, as bodies that show but never feel. In both cases, no room is made for a discussion of the idea of one's sensual experience with cultural forms as an experience which cuts across class, where the body becomes a legitimate site of aesthetic experience (see Shusterman, 2000).

Thus, in Bourdieu's work, body and clothes never seem complementary in their materiality: clothes are never actualized by the body rather than simply carried by it, like a flag, nor is the body brought to life in its

appropriation of clothes, a 'lived experiential body' (Entwistle, 2000: 4; see also Sweetman, 2001), or given a specific but ever-changing identity through practices of dress (see, e.g., Wilson, 1992). These are situated practices which are not just strategies of distinction or pretension but also tactics in De Certeau's (1988) sense of the word – improvised punctual techniques of being in and adapting oneself to a concrete everyday space and the objects of material culture in a poetic manner. As Dant (1999) observes, 'things are not just representations, but also have a physical presence in the world which has material consequences' (pp. 1–2). This dimension is missing from Bourdieu's work, however, which does not account for the dual role of objects as both symbols – and therefore indices and tools of class distinction – and also material artefacts consumed for this materiality.

Bourdieu's neglect of the textuality of fashion objects and the reduction of the experience of them to field positionality and strategies of distinction and pretension is symptomatic of his approach to cultural artefacts and cultural processes as a whole (see Crowther, 1994; Fowler, 1994, on Bourdieu and art; Lahire, 1999a, on Bourdieu and literature; Robbins, 2000: 122, on Bourdieu and his critics). Bourdieu is interested in the process of affirmation of difference rather than in 'the level of particularity which makes difference *real*' (Crowther, 1994: 163). High cultural texts and practices, on the one hand, can be desacralized as markers of class distinction only: their value is not substantial but differential; it allows participation in the game of class differentiation. Mass cultural texts and experiences are deprived of meaning – they have no value in the game of cultural distinction, which is the game of high culture – and they are derided as alienating, as mentioned earlier. Paying attention to the specificity of popular cultural texts and practices, such as mass fashion and its consumption and production, and to the meanings invested in these texts, however, might have been a first step towards a questioning of Bourdieu's analysis of consumption in terms of status competition and of the traditional hierarchy between high and mass culture which frames his cultural theory.

Finally, according to Bourdieu (1996a), the decisions the working classes make in the field of consumption are 'pragmatic' (p. 376) and 'realistic' (p. 200). Their use of clothing is 'functionalist' (p. 200). What matters to them is 'what will last' (p. 200) and what can satisfy their concern for substance rather than appearance.

WORKING-CLASS CONSUMPTION OF FASHION: 'THE TASTE FOR NECESSITY'

The working class's taste is a taste for and imposed by necessity (Bourdieu, 1996a: 374). It defines and is defined by the working-class habitus – the

habitus being a ‘set of historical relations “deposited” within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action’ (Bourdieu, 1996b: 16), and dominates all spheres of working-class consumption. Thus the working classes can only like what they can *afford* to like, as in the choice of ‘the “value for money” clothes which economic necessity assigns to them in any case’ (Bourdieu, 1996a: 377–8).

Such an account contrasts with that of Partington (1992), who points to the working class’s attention to formal creativity rather than strict substantial realism. She shows how some working-class women appropriated the 1950s Dior New Look to create a new fashion within their own means, however limited. A working-class aesthetic was deployed to develop a new style through the consumption of an already existing one, its *bricolage*. The consumption she mentions is not marked by a taste for necessity, and is not simply emulation or pretension either. It is an act of re-creation or production in the sense developed by De Certeau (1988), part of an aesthetic of tricks and the multiple tactics of the appropriation of everyday materials for the creation of less ordinary ones, such as *a version* of the New Look. There is no trace in Partington’s work of a working-class taste for necessity, a taste for clothes which are merely functional and uncreatively consumed. The working classes she looks at do not ‘reject specifically aesthetic intentions as aberrations’ (Bourdieu, 1996a: 376), contrary to Bourdieu’s claim. Rather, their

. . . popular fashion mixed the glamorous and the practical, fused function and meaning (objectification and identification), by incorporating elements from styles which designers assumed would take their meaning from the clear distinctions between them. (Partington, 1992: 159)

The correlations Bourdieu draws between class and the consumption of fashion cannot account for the centrality of fashion in the life of working-class women, who might, like Carolyn Steedman (1997) in her youth (see also Kondo, 1997: 112), see make-up and clothes as ‘the material stepping-stones of [their] escape’ (p. 15) from ordinary life.

Moreover, Bourdieu (1996a) argues that the working-class taste for necessity exists in an embodied form, in the way working-class women relate to their body. They ‘do not value themselves sufficiently’, he notes, ‘to grant’ the care ‘needed to achieve and maintain health, slimness and beauty’ (p. 380). Working-class women might well not spend their time caring for their body; however, in Partington’s (1992) study they do think that their body is worth adorning. The styles they created for themselves,

she shows, allowed them to negotiate the distinction between ‘“housewife” (functional woman) and sex object (decorative woman)’ (p. 159), which they simultaneously were.

In the fieldwork he conducted in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, Willis (1996) also notes that even if the contemporary economic situation restricted the fashion consumption of young working-class members, they still managed ‘to dress stylishly and to express their identities through the clothes they wear . . . and make the most out of slender resources, buying secondhand clothes or saving up to buy particular items of clothing’ (p. 86). A sense of aesthetic is at play, not a functional one, as in Bourdieu’s work, but an aesthetic of being in and experiencing the physical world for its own sake, which might even go against practical considerations, as in the bikers’ choice of outfit. The way bikers wear their jackets, fully open whilst riding, Willis (1978) observes, has nothing to do with protection and technical efficiency. Rather it is meant to allow them to feel ‘the full brunt of [the jacket’s] movement in the natural physical world’ (p. 56). It is a particular way of wearing an outfit, which permits the desired mediation between the bikers’ bodies and the natural environment, a tactic which also draws attention to the materiality of dress, its physical significance. Working-class consumption cannot unproblematically be said to be informed by a ‘taste for necessity’ (see also Grignon and Passeron, 1989: 139, for a critique of this expression).

Moreover, there are in Bourdieu’s more recent work some elements which can be used to oppose his bleak view of the working-class consumption of fashion. In *La Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu, 1993b: 84) he shows in the interview he conducted with young poor people from the Paris suburbs how they find it impossible to stay outside the logic of consumption, even if it means stealing. These young people do not have the taste for necessity which, according to Bourdieu, should be part of their habitus. Far from being satisfied with the types of clothes they can afford, they want those they cannot afford, an expensive leather jacket, for instance, and acquire them through stealing, so as to distinguish themselves from their peers. They have this taste for distinction which, Bourdieu however argues, is characteristic of bourgeois consumption.

In the work of the French sociologist, as Lahire (1999b) observes, ‘adhesion to practice is such that all doubts are erased. One does not resist, one is not attracted to other desires, worked on by other drives’ (p. 132). Bourdieu’s is a restricted vision of individuals understood as unified beings rather than as plural ones, the carriers of a multitude of complex and often contradictory dispositions, constitutive of a heterogeneous and divided

habitus (see also Lahire, 1999b: 148–149). However, in contemporary society, there are so many instances of socialization which offer so many varied lifestyles – a ‘heterogeneity of the lived’ (Dubet, quoted in Corcuff, 1999: 111) – that there is a multitude of discrepancies *within* and not just *between* habituses, products of ‘the tensions of experience’ (p. 111). An individual’s habitus might very well be fragmented, resulting in what Lahire (1999b), for instance, calls ‘multi-socialised’ and ‘multi-determined’ individuals (p. 149).

CONCLUSION

Bourdieu’s analysis of the field of fashion, like his sociology more generally, draws on invaluable conceptual tools such as subfield, struggle and position. However, it is also a partial analysis, exclusive of the many situations where contradictions and complexities occur which challenge the mechanics of his analytical framework, drawing attention to its rigidity. Subfields, for Bourdieu, are clearly distinct from each other, patterns of consumption are neatly articulated along the lines of class, and the relation between production and consumption of fashion unproblematically resolved through the idea of homology. Transitional states, irregularities and dissonances are minimized or simply left unexplored. As Martucelli (1999) argues:

It remains to understand why and how a sociology which so often encounters discrepancies, in so many domains and for such a long time, continues to make of the adjustment between cognitive structures and social structures, between the objective and the subjective, the nodal point of its project . . . When anomalies multiply to the point where they overcome regularities, should one really continue to preserve the initial model? (p. 141)

Fashion has become a global post-fordist industry, which makes transitional states and dissonances even more pronounced. Players are more numerous, the market more fragmented, while the products on offer appear and disappear faster than may be possible for a fashion to really have time to settle and allow clear strategies of class differentiation to be expressed. New patterns of consumption and production of fashion have emerged which do not easily fit Bourdieu’s model, not least being those influenced by the importance in contemporary society of mass fashion. As Wilson (1988: 393) argues, since the 1970s the supremacy of high couture has been challenged by mass fashion, which has now become dominant. This is a

crucial change not confined to the field of fashion exclusively but, some have argued (see, for instance, Hall 1997; Nowell-Smith, 1987; Schwarz, 1989), relevant to the field of culture more generally – a change with which Bourdieu, however, has failed to engage, hence also failing to reflect on the influence such changes might have had on his model of thought.

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