

Communication on Art, or the Work of Art as Communication? Bourdieu's Field Analysis Compared with Luhmann's Systems Theory

I.

Is it possible to outline a *general* sociological theory of the arts? For several reasons, this question did not receive a lot of attention within so-called academic mainstream sociology.¹ Indeed, until recently, the arts were not a much debated topic in sociological research and theorizing. For the most part, empirical research was restricted to audience studies, while general theorizing about the relationships between the arts and society was characteristic of only one paradigm within the social sciences, namely neo-Marxism or the so-called Critical Theory (Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin, etc.).

Most of the time, sociologists point to certain distinctive features of the art product in order to explain the difficulties in outlining a general sociological theory of the arts. Notwithstanding the merits of this type of explanation, two recent attempts to formulate such a theory both show in a very clear way that the prospects for a general sociological approach of the arts also depend on axiomatic assumptions about society and "the social." To put it bluntly: the possibility of a general sociological theory of the arts not only involves the specific status of the arts, but, perhaps first and foremost, the epistemological and disciplinary identity of sociology and, more generally, of social science.

The attempts in question are both voluminous studies, namely Pierre Bourdieu's *Les Règles de l'art* (1992) and Niklas Luhmann's *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995).² Both books are explicitly presented as specimen of sociology, but they strongly differ in content. In this paper, I shall examine some

1 See the critical overviews by Zolberg and Hennion.

2 In this article, *Les Règles de l'art* is abbreviated as LRA and *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* as DKG. All translations from *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* are mine. For *Les Règles de l'art*, the first mentioned page number refers to the original French version, while the second one to its English version, *The Rules of Art*.

of the most striking differences in more detail, thus trying to justify the statement that in more than one respect, every sociology of art "reflects" basic answers to basic questions concerning the general status of sociology as a particular scientific enterprise, and as a distinctive academic discipline.

As the following paragraphs will make clear, my brief comparison of LRA with DKG is not a neutral exercise. I shall be highly critical of Bourdieu's approach and take sides with Luhmann's. This does not mean that I have no epistemological, analytic, or conceptual reservations about Luhmann's systems theory. But whereas Bourdieu still advocates a mono-contextual sociology that, as such, makes strong *ontological* claims about the ultimate nature of society and "the social," Luhmann's writings at least try to open social theory to the constructivist (or "post-structuralist") turn within among others philosophy and literary theory (see, e.g., Schmidt 1988, 1992; Watzlawick). The approach outlined in DKG is in every respect a contemporary one; LRA on the contrary illustrates the still dominant line of sociological reasoning in which intellectual analysis is mistaken for a polemical critique of handed-down images of art and society. It is indeed a decisive question whether a social science, such as sociology, actively constructs its object(s) of knowledge, or, on the other hand, whether it understands its own production of knowledge in terms of a realistic representation of given social facts.

II.

In the opening pages of LRA, Bourdieu remarks that "this rage to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art, or, to use a more appropriate word, its transcendence" (xiv) a priori disqualifies the possibility of a genuine sociological approach of the arts. However, is not this aesthetic belief a specific, modern form of *illusio*? Constitutive as it may be for the production and reception of contemporary art, does the belief in the ineffable, enigmatic qualities of aesthetic communication not necessarily misunderstand the social preconditions of the possibility of this kind of belief? In a word, are pure aesthetics or the love of art for art's sake not necessarily blind for the social ("impure") origins of their own ("pure") insights?

Of course, Bourdieu only raises these questions in order to emphasize his own affirmative answers. Thus, the third part of LRA ("To Understand Understanding" [283]) offers a broad sketch of, first, "The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic," and, second, "The Social Genesis of the Eye" (285-321). In these considerations, Bourdieu resumes from a more historical point of view one of the basic theses of *La Distinction*, his voluminous study of the class structure of postwar France from the point of view of cultural consumption (1979). According to Bourdieu, pure aesthetics is the product of a specific disposition, of a cultivated habitus to let formal qualities prevail in the perception and evaluation of objects. "One could say that it is the eye of the

aesthete which constitutes the work of art" (289), thus Bourdieu remarks. This constitutive act is only possible if in real life one need not worry about his living conditions. The aesthetic disposition or habitus is the privilege of the financially (or institutionally) privileged. Among the latter, Bourdieu again distinguishes a specific sub-group, the cultural bourgeoisie, made up of people who own a great amount of so-called cultural capital. In general, these people possess at least a university degree. Moreover, they have acquired in a more or less implicit way a marked taste for, and knowledge of, the arts through the process of primary socialization, which was then further refined through the practices of reading, visiting the theater, listening to classical music, and so on.

In LRA, Bourdieu completes his sociological analysis of the social preconditions of the aesthetic habitus with a general theory of artistic production (47-176) and "A Science of Works of Art" (177-284). The former focuses on the genesis of an autonomous field of cultural production during the second half of the nineteenth century. In French literature, Baudelaire and Flaubert exemplify the decisive break: both emancipated writing from political, moral and commercial imperatives. In the history of French painting, the impressionists made a similar move. They contested the dominance of academic painting, and were able to establish an autonomous zone of pure research within the realm of the fine arts.

With his "science of art products," Bourdieu tries to uncover the hidden social logic of autonomous aesthetic production. Every work of art, he argues, embodies a *prise de position*, a selection within a historically given "space of aesthetic possibilities." Thus, for example, a writer who starts a new novel has to adopt a certain style, he has to choose from possible themes or subjects, and so on. In Bourdieu's view, these aesthetic decisions are strongly related to social factors. First, every artist occupies a particular position within the cultural field. He is a debutante or a much acclaimed artist, he owns a small or a great amount of symbolic capital (Bourdieu's term for the more common notion of reputation, or cultural recognition). Second, the artist in question has a particular social background, resulting in an aesthetic habitus that, to a greater or a lesser extent, has been further developed during primary and secondary education. In accordance with his "general theory of the economy of practices" (1980), Bourdieu claims that both the actual field position and the acquired aesthetic disposition (or habitus) determine in an *unconscious way* the position taken up within a historically given space of artistic possibilities: "the *space of positions* tends to govern the *space of position-takings*. It is to the specific 'interests' associated with different positions of the literary field that one must look for the principle of literary (etc.) position-takings" (LRA 231). A few pages later he modifies and refines this relation:

the relationship among positions and position-takings is by no means a relationship of mechanical determination. Between one and the other, in some fashion, the space of possibilities interposes itself, that is to say, the space of position-takings actually realized, as it appears when it is perceived through the categories of perception constitutive of a certain habitus. (LRA 234-35)

III.

It is possible to interpret Bourdieu's general sociological theory of art in the same way as he himself interprets artistic behavior. More particularly, one can discern within Bourdieu's way of reasoning a highly specific *prise de position* within the space of sociological possibilities. Hereafter, I shall mention only the most striking features of this position.

First, every work of art is seen as the representation of an aesthetic position that in itself represents in a hidden way "something else." This "something else" — this "outside" — is the social, seen from a double point of view. On the one hand, the social is a specific field of cultural production, which consists of interrelated positions taken up by individual actors and collective institutions, and which is unified by a historically specific distribution of symbolic capital that gives some position-holders much, others less recognition. On the other hand, the social is a class structure, consisting of positions that offer a differential access to material and cultural life chances, which are interiorized in the form of a class-bounded series of dispositions or habitus. With this double determination of the social "outside" of every work of art corresponds a double determination of its "inside." An art product is *essentially* the result of aesthetic choices related, first, to the position which the artist occupies within his professional field, and, second, to his class background.

Furthermore, as the countless remarks on *illusio* and belief aptly demonstrate, the social "inside" of the process of artistic production and of the work of art, is an *unseen* or *unconscious* reality: "it is the quality of social logic that it can *institute* in the form of fields and of habituses an essentially social libido ... that is to say, the fundamental adhesion to the game, the *illusio*, the recognition of the game and the utility of the game, belief in the value of the game and in its stakes" (172-73). For this reason, everything the artist — but the same holds true for the art lover, the critic, and all other people who subscribe to the illusion of pure aesthetics — thinks or communicates about (the productive origins of) a work of art, is necessarily *self-delusive*. Only the sociologist, the academic expert in social matters, is able to make the unconscious social essence of every art product conscious. Only his discourse speaks the final truth about the process of artistic production, and about aesthetic products. Paul Crowther thus undoubtedly has a point when he remarks, in an article aptly titled "Sociological Imperialism and the Field of Cultural Production," that Bourdieu's "approach is one which simply displaces the foundational epistemological claims

(usually associated with philosophy) to the field of sociology — in Bourdieu's grand style" (Crowther 160-61).

But something else is at stake in Bourdieu's sociological discourse about the true nature of the "something else," the hidden social "outside/inside" of every work of art. From an epistemological point of view, Bourdieu's critical approach in terms of consciousness ("pure aesthetics") and unconsciousness (the social), *illusio* and truth, is necessarily based on what one can term the *cognitive identity premise*. More particularly, Bourdieu assumes that artists, critics and other art lovers see exactly the same objects as the sociologically informed scholar. Art lover (or "aesthete") and sociologist must both inhabit one world, one universe of shared perceptions and observations. Otherwise the latter cannot claim that his analysis of the social origins of every work of art *reveals* what is hidden, the blind spots within the descriptions of the former.

In a word, Bourdieu presupposes in LRA the existence of a monotelic world in which observations or descriptions are only various interpretations of the same basic facts, namely works of art. These interpretations always possess a specific truth-value: the art lovers' interpretations are false (or doxic), those of the sociologist à la Bourdieu depict the same facts in a true or realistic way. Within this "one-world ontology" — to borrow an expression coined by Habermas — observations or descriptions have never been interpreted as constative operations that "shape" the world, they are invariably seen as representations of an "outside" that is not touched by variations in vocabulary, cognitive distinctions and interests, and so on. But is such an ontology not a construction?

IV.

Constructivism is, of course, a very vague label. In his work, Luhmann mainly uses it to stress the idea that every sort of knowledge about the so-called real world, presupposes one or more observations that must make use of distinctions not found in reality itself: "The observing system operates by means of distinctions that, as distinctions, do not correspond with something in the outside world... For this very reason, everything that is reality for the observer, is reality thanks to the unity of the used distinction, and therefore construction" (1990, 518-19). In a word, knowledge is construction because it necessarily implies observation(s) and the process of observation implies the use of specific distinctions that characterize the observing system in question, and not the world as such.

Luhmann's constructivism radicalizes the basic idea of a fairly unknown book by the American philosopher George Spencer Brown. In *Logic of Forms*, originally published in 1968, Brown argues that, in a general way, every act of observation can be described in terms of the processing of forms or two-sided distinctions. For in order to observe anything at all — or, for that matter, in

order to communicate something "about" something — one has, simultaneously to distinguish "this" from "that" (e.g., "art" from "kitsch") on the one hand and to use one side of the employed form or distinction as an indication (e.g., "it is kitsch") on the other hand. Thus, every observation — and, *a fortiori*, every informative communication — is both a distinction and a designation. Only this operation results in a "marked space," distinguished from a non-marked space (or, as Luhmann usually puts it, "all the rest," "the non-observed world"). But, and this is the real point, one cannot observe something, and simultaneously observe the observation. The used distinction is necessarily the blind spot of the observation in question. In other words, an observation ("insight") is only possible on the basis of a non-observation ("blindness"). To observe the distinction used in an observation requires a second observation. This second-order observation can be the work of the system that made the first-order observation, in which case a minimal time lag will be necessary. The alternative is that it is the work of another observing system, in which case it is possible to synchronize second-order and first-order observations.

Luhmann gives Spencer Brown's logic of forms a sociological twist — *not*: a sociological foundation — in his analysis of modern society in terms of functional differentiation.³ According to Luhmann, modern society consists of several autonomous, but interdependent, subsystems, each performing a specific societal function. These subsystems, such as economy, politics, science, law, and education are *observed* by means of the conceptual apparatus of contemporary systems theory. In line with the epistemological constructivism he espouses, Luhmann presents this apparatus as a polyhierarchical system of forms, a multidimensional series of conceptual distinctions. More particularly, he analyzes every social system, and *a fortiori* each societal subsystem, as an autopoietic or "self-generative" system of communications. Moreover, societal subsystems are characterized by the fact that the internal communicative operations are regulated by a particular binary code, or by a "leading distinction" (*Leitdistinzen*).⁴ Thus, communications within science are processed according to the binding difference between true and untrue statements, economy processes communications on the basis of the distinction between payments and

the absence of payments (or, money vs. not money), and the realm of politics is structured around the binary code power vs. non-power (to communicate in an authoritative way). By definition, being a communication system, each societal subsystem is an observing system as well. For, as has already been said, to communicate ("to inform") necessarily implies the use of certain distinctions.

V.

But what relevance do these apparently trivial, and at the same time quite abstract, observations about observing systems and functional differentiation have for a general sociological theory of the arts? Luhmann's constructivist epistemology has several important consequences for the overall design and status of such a theory. Here, I shall limit myself to those which immediately highlight some principal differences between Luhmann's approach and the one advocated by Bourdieu.

First, the observations and (self-)descriptions produced within the context of the artistic subsystem necessarily differ from the observations and descriptions of this specific subsystem made within other subsystems. For the latter will be based on a different code or "leading distinction" than the one employed by, for instance, artists, critics or art lovers. Thus, an economist, or, more generally, an observing system belonging to the economic subsystem, shall observe the artistic subsystem by means of the distinction money/no money. The resulting description shall represent the artistic subsystem as a (semi-)market, characterized by, for instance, a highly speculative logic of investment. This economic interpretation is not a true or realistic picture of the art world. A scientific description, such as a genuinely sociological one, will be "informed" by the distinction between true and untrue statements. But even scientific observations of the artistic subsystem can, *qua* observations, not claim to be realistic representations of the art world. Moreover, they can never be played off against the self-descriptions of the artistic subsystem. For within the latter, a specific code or distinction is used, namely "matching/not matching" (or, in the vocabulary of traditional aesthetics, "beautiful/ugly"). Indeed, in the artistic subsystem, Luhmann claims: "every operation, be it an observation by the artist, be it an observation by a viewer, must decide if, in respect to a specific form, it does or does not match, if it does or does not fit in a contiguous way with the arising work (*viz.* the work one starts to observe)" (DKG 315).

In order not to misunderstand the point of Luhmann's sociological constructivism, it is important to notice that a code, *qua* code, is nothing more than an abstract binary distinction. Within subsystems, the concrete attribution of one of the two sides of this distinction to particular statements ("it's true"), to particular art products ("this is a beautiful painting"), or to particular political acts ("he does not have the power to do that") is based on so-called programs. Thanks to this conceptual distinction Luhmann can simultaneously think the unity

3 In Luhmann's earlier writings, the notion of differentiation is the basic concept (see, for example, 1982). In the beginning of the 1980s, Luhmann attempted to catch up with new developments in systems theory, esp. the notion of autopoiesis, by reformulating his insights in terms of communication (see, especially, 1984). From the mid-1980s onward, he again reviewed his ideas: the notion of observation moved to the center of his theoretical preoccupations. One should notice that in Luhmann's actual work, concepts that were formerly central, are not put aside: they only acquire new meanings in the light of the now central constructivist theory of observing systems.

4 See, besides DKG and the already mentioned *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*, and *Das Recht der Gesellschaft*.

and the variety of subsystems. Indeed, as for instance the existence of conflicting aesthetic beliefs and norms aptly demonstrates, one code or "leading distinction" allows for a huge variety of more concrete programs; and vice versa. The different programs all refer to the same *Leitdifferenz* (see the chapter on coding and programming, presented under the heading of "selforganization" in DKG 301-40).

To summarize, as a functionally differentiated social system, modern society is necessarily poly-contextual. For different subsystems use different codes and the use of different codes results in different observations or descriptions. This implies among other matters that a sociological description of the artistic subsystem cannot claim to be more truthful than the self-descriptions circulating within the observed subsystem. Moreover, the scientific code ("truth/untruth") does not rule out the possibility of several research programs, or more or less systematic ensembles of theoretical insights and methodological receipts. As such, different sociologies of art are conceivable, each one using a specific set of distinctions in processes of observation of the artistic subsystem, which are at the same time all regulated by the overall *Leitdifferenz* "truth/untruth." Thus, *pace* Bourdieu, a sociologist can, yes must, claim *a* truth, but he can never maintain to speak *the* truth. And, of course, the same sociologist has the principal possibility to observe the (mode of) self-observations produced within the artistic subsystem. Doing so, he may even discover the blind spots of the observed observations. But, by definition, these (sociological) second-order observations differ from first-order observations....

VI.

What is the basic operation within an autonomous field of cultural production (Bourdieu), or within the artistic subsystem (Luhmann)? According to Bourdieu, "the anti-'economic' economy of pure art ... is orientated to the accumulation of symbolic capital" (142) and "the only legitimate accumulation, for the author as for the critic, for the art dealer as for the publisher or theatre director, consists in making a name for oneself, a name that is known and recognized" (148). Again, this process of building up a reputation has an unconscious character. Seeking (more) symbolic capital, which may afterwards be converted into economic capital, is an act that neither artists nor critics perform in a conscious way.

In general, Bourdieu argues, two strategies can be followed in the struggle over symbolic capital. Either the agent in question subscribes to the existing definition of legitimate art, to the momentary established criteria of good literature, interesting theater, and so on; or he rejects orthodoxy, and opts for a heterodox standard. The latter, non-conformist choice, *ipso facto* obliges the agent to enter into the struggle for the general recognition of the advocated aesthetic norms. For otherwise, one shall always be a marginal person, an artist

(or critic, art dealer, and so on) who has no, or only a negligible, reputation.

Bourdieu's interpretation of the basic operative logic of the autonomous field of cultural production is clearly the result of the systematic use of one — and only one — form or binary distinction, namely the difference between (symbolic) power and powerlessness. Seen from the perspective of Luhmann's systems theory, this actually means that Bourdieu observes the artistic subsystem in terms of the code that prevails within the sphere of politics. However, the most striking point in Bourdieu's analysis is the systematic neglect of the singularity of each work of art. Notwithstanding his claims to the contrary, Bourdieu has virtually nothing to say about, e.g., the specific *écriture* of a novel or the particular sonority of an orchestral composition. As a matter of fact, the art product is, again and again, reduced to an object for investment. In other words, Bourdieu's externalist approach is less a sociology of art than a quite crude socio-analysis of "unconscious" career-moves (or, more to the point, of moves that are observed according to the ontologically interpreted distinction conscious vs. unconscious).

VII.

Unveiling high or legitimate culture as an arena necessarily fixes the analytical attention on communications *about* art products (or about aesthetic criteria, about the evaluation of art products, and so on). For only in and through communicative acts, a reputation can be established or contested. On the contrary, Luhmann focuses in DKG on the artistic subsystem as an autonomous system of communication, in which the works of art are the basic "units."

DKG opens with the thesis that every work of art couples perception (a psychic act) with communication (a societal act). An artistic product communicates, even when "it has nothing to say," that is, even if it is only grasped as an utterance (*Mitteilung*, *énonciation*) that contains no decipherable information (*Information*, *énoncé*). The specificity of artistic communications is constituted by the fact that they require acts of perception. Nevertheless, as communications, works of art are part of society. For communication, Luhmann has argued in *Soziale Systeme*, is the basic societal operation. Society is synonymous with the vast, unimaginable whole that comprises all communications at a certain moment. Therefore, one does not need to look for the social character of the work of art in unconscious mediations, such as the ways in which an unconscious, class-bounded habitus has shaped a specific art product. First and foremost, a conceptual apparatus is needed that offers one the possibility to observe the specificity of the communication within the artistic subsystem.

According to Luhmann, the work of art communicates by way of forms. Each art product "is a series of mutually tied distinctions, in which one side of a distinction necessitates new distinctions" (DKG 123). Thus, a novel may start

with the sentence "Once upon a time, King Lear ruled over Britain." A distinction is made between a marked, imaginary space, and a "real," unmarked space. This first distinction urges a new one, be it a re-entry of the just-used distinction: "But of course, this is not a truthful statement." And so on: distinction follows upon distinction, designation upon designation. In this (autopoietic) way, a self-referential system of forms or observations emerges, in which a later distinction is, again and again, linked with a former one. As has already been *observed*, the observation of this process is regulated by a code. More particularly, the central question remains whether a later distinction seems appropriate or not, whether it does or does not match. If the art product in question is successful, the web of distinctions looks evident, even necessary. Or to put it another way:

one could perhaps say: a work of art fails when an observer loses control over the combined play of the forms; when he thus can no longer recognize, how a selected form, in the light of what it furthermore requires from the work of art, is connected to the other selections of forms. But this can only be made manifest in a particular work of art, not by invoking principles or rules. (DKG 328)

Of course, a work of art is not a series of distinctions in the strict, ontological sense of "to be." To observe it in such a way, an observing system is needed. For this reason, Luhmann considers the act of observation of a work of art — the processing of distinctions or forms — as the basic, most elementary operation within the artistic subsystem. This elementary act is also constitutive for the production of a work of art. For the artist must observe: he constantly has to select distinctions that "fit," or that seem appropriate within the context of the already used distinctions. With every new distinction, the field of possible connective distinctions narrows. An artist starts in a situation of nearly endless freedom, and he ends up with nearly unbearable constraints. Meanwhile, the reduction of selective possibilities or of complexity, generates a specific form of controlled complexity, a more or less complex work of art.

Undoubtedly, Luhmann's systems-theoretical approach of artistic communication is very complex, highly abstract, quite formalistic, and, considered from the dominant sociological points of view, not "really sociological at all." But perhaps, sociologists should finally accept the idea that a truly *general sociological theory* of the arts, necessarily differs from a polemical approach of the social, and has nothing to do with the self-acclaimed power to see what the others do not see. For the latter, for example artists, do see what sociologists cannot see: they see "something else"

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