



## Review: Class Attitudes and Ambiguous Aesthetic Claims

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*Photography: A Middle-Brow Art.* by Pierre Bourdieu; Luc Boltanski; Robert Castel;  
Jean-Claude Chamboredon; Dominique Schnapper; Shaun Whiteside

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## Class Attitudes and Ambiguous Aesthetic Claims

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*Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, by **Pierre Bourdieu**, with **Luc Boltanski**, **Robert Castel**, **Jean-Claude Chamboredon**, and **Dominique Schnapper**. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. 218 pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-8047-1760-5.

In his essay on photography written a quarter-century ago the eminent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pursues two goals simultaneously. Through photography he examines the French stratification system as it expresses itself in the production and consumption of cultural goods. He also describes the profession as an ambiguous cultural practice, only quasi-legitimate and fundamentally different from more traditional art such as painting. The book title reflects this twofold intention: photography is a middle-class practice and an art poised only at midpoint in the hierarchy of cultural expressive systems.

The book is divided into two distinct parts: a substantial exposition by Bourdieu is followed by case studies written by collaborators in order to verify and buttress Bourdieu's assumptions. Searching for the meanings practitioners give to their work and for class attitudes toward photography, Bourdieu uses a blend of surveys, interviews, and ethnographic data, part of the same data which also inform his monumental *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Why focus on photography in this earlier work? Because it offers a privileged way of understanding the aesthetics that dominate the discourse and the practices of different classes. Individual attitudes toward photography implicitly express class relationships; they also illuminate how class values are transmitted even in the absence of formal educational channels.

As an ordinary cultural practice, Bourdieu argues, photography is cheap, technically simple to learn, and not formally encouraged. It is ruled by norms of what is photographable, and its social function is to record "souvenirs" of events, people, and objects. The practice captures festive events, gives expression to a collective memory, consecrates social identity, and celebrates leisure. In a Durkheimian sense it serves to reinforce

family integration. What matters is the picture produced, not the process.

Depending on one's perspective, photographers with aesthetic ambitions are seen either as devotees of the art or as deviants. Aesthetic ambitions do not necessarily correlate with high education, in contrast to other artistic endeavors, but are mostly found among segments of the middle classes. For the devotees, a small minority, the aesthetic project is often limited to a rejection of popular norms.

Class differences in judgments exist, yet not as strongly as for traditional art. Peasants see photography as a frivolous luxury fostered by urbanites. Urban manual workers accept traditional practices without further aesthetic considerations. Clerical workers consider photography a minor art, uncertain of its legitimacy. They reject traditional practice and differentiate themselves from manual workers by affirming a taste for the "modern." Junior executives also challenge the popular realist aesthetic and often grant photography the status of art. They also acquire the latest equipment, aspire to virtuosity, affirm their difference, and assert "a poor man's aestheticism." Senior executives, in contrast, state that they attribute great value to photography but in practice limit themselves to traditional functions and easily ignore aesthetic ambitions.

Going beyond a class analysis, Bourdieu then reflects on the aesthetics of photography. The popular aesthetic is often defined in contrast to an implicit scholarly one. It claims realism and objectivity; it values purpose, information, or moral interest; it is governed by norms of posture; it shuns distortion as attempted mystification. In consecrated fields such as painting or the theater, norms of "good taste" are passed on through education. Photography, however, lacks the authority of its own technical models and aesthetic theories and thus is only at midpoint in the

hierarchies of legitimation which organize cultural systems of expression. No wonder then that photographers feel the need to justify the existence of photography as true art.

The second part of the book offers case studies of groups that actively oppose the naive popular view of photography. Camera clubs fall into two categories. When members are middle-class, painting is the compelling aesthetic reference, and the refusal to acknowledge technical considerations is considered indispensable. On the other hand, working-class youth clubs reject aesthetic preoccupations and express their love of technology by making the darkroom the heart of the camera club. They promote their own relationship to technology and to culture by proclaiming what they see as the victory of instrument over nature. Faced with these opposing perspectives, photography seems unable to establish an autonomous aesthetic.

Photographic artists who exhibit their work want to minimize the contradiction between the social uses of photography and its practice as art, yet the contradiction never seems entirely forgotten. Discontinuity also presents a problem. While taking, developing, and printing photographs are creative acts, the process is a fragmented one and disruptive to the continuity of inspiration. The threats of repetition and copying are constant. One way out of the dilemma is to deny the authority of the process, as Man Ray did (p. 140). Insecurity leads to polemics, yet all artists agree on the necessity to seek consecration by establishing photographic museums.

The final study examines professional photographers in their diversity of training, status, income, and specialization, the last of which follows a hierarchical pattern. For example, prestigious specializations such as

fashion photography preferably employ members of the upper classes.

The version of the book that we are given here differs from the French original in several ways. The title of the French edition, *A Middle-Brow Art: An Essay on the Social Uses of Photography* (my translation), is more modest and more accurate. Two chapters on press and publicity photography are missing, as well as the original version's conclusion on the symbolic and imaginary aspects of photography, all written by collaborators. Missing also are the methodological appendices. I could accept more easily this truncated version if the book had a postscript with Bourdieu's reflections on the changes likely to have occurred since the book was first published. For example, has the creation of photographic museums served to legitimate photographic practice as an art form with an autonomous aesthetic? Do the high prices paid for artistic photographs attest to an increasingly higher place in the hierarchies of cultural legitimation? The book contains many of the ideas that Bourdieu develops more fully in *Distinction*; it should therefore be read more for the light it sheds on photography itself and for the aesthetic questions that it raises than for its class analysis. Finally, as Bourdieu himself would agree, this is a very French book, and the reader may wish to use it in a comparative way.

The English translation is timely. American readers reflecting on the recent controversy and trial surrounding the exhibition of some of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs may relate Bourdieu's perspective on the ambiguity of photography to the jury's call for testimonies whether the disputed pictures were artistic or obscene. Perhaps photography has come of age—and Bourdieu helps us to see it.

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## Commentary on the Commentaries

I should like first of all to thank *Contemporary Sociology* (and Vera Zolberg) for having offered me this opportunity to pursue the dialogue with American colleagues that has always been of great importance to me. Why

not say publicly what I have often had occasion to say privately? I deeply respect the tradition of free, frank, and amicable discussion that has developed and persists in American universities, and I owe a great deal