

A CONTEMPORARY LOOK AT PIERRE BOURDIEU'S *PHOTOGRAPHY: A MIDDLE-BROW ART*

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BECAUSE IT IS A 'CHOICE THAT PRAISES,' BECAUSE IT STRIVES TO CAPTURE, THAT IS, TO SOLEMNIZE AND TO IMMORTALIZE, PHOTOGRAPHY CANNOT BE DELIVERED OVER TO THE RANDOMNESS OF THE INDIVIDUAL IMAGINATION AND, VIA THE MEDIATION OF THE *ETHOS*, THE INTERNALIZATION OF OBJECTIVE AND COMMON REGULARITIES, THE GROUP PLACES THIS PRACTICE UNDER ITS COLLECTIVE RULE SO THAT THE MOST TRIVIAL PHOTOGRAPH EXPRESSES, APART FROM THE EXPLICIT INTENTIONS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER, THE SYSTEM OF SCHEMES OF PERCEPTION, THOUGHT AND APPRECIATION COMMON TO A WHOLE GROUP.¹

In *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Castel, Dominique Schnapper, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Luc Boltanski situate the practice of photography within the larger social practices of collective identity formation. Although the title of the book implies that the subject is "photography," it is made immediately clear that it is not about *photographs*. It is the social practice of "taking pictures" and its interpretation which concerns Bourdieu and the four other co-authors of this study, rather than the specific photographs (middle-brow or otherwise) which are taken. In this way the book provides an analysis of photographic practice while avoiding the formalistic discussions which accompany most art historical studies of photography. Of course it is not really possible to separate an image from its social interpretation or intention — a point made by Bourdieu himself. For this reason he equally rejects the simplistic assumption that the photograph should merely function as an objective visual illustration of a larger sociological argument. Indeed, it appears to be Bourdieu's intention in this work to question the very ground upon which such assumptions concerning the socially regulated functions of photography can be made.

A brief synopsis of the text will help to situate the discussion that follows. The book is divided into two sections. In the first section, after an insightful introduction (which appeared in English in *VAR*, Spring 1991) Bourdieu discusses the photographic practice as "an index and instrument of integration" (vi). In this first

chapter entitled "The Cult of Unity and Cultivated Differences," he hopes to show the ways in which photography is used by families to define membership and to mark important or solemn occasions. Those not following traditional family photographic practice are seen (non-pejoratively) as "deviant" in their refusal of the norms of the social class to which they belong. Bourdieu suggests that people can delimit class boundaries by engaging in different forms of photographic activity. In his second chapter, "The Social Definition of Photography," Bourdieu questions certain assumptions concerning photography: notably, that it is somehow an "objective" medium. He also points out that the popular understanding of photography does not conform to traditional theories of aesthetics. Finally he shows that, as a practice, photography has an ambiguous and differing legitimacy within different social groups.

The second section of the book proposes to study those groups which have distinguished themselves as somehow surpassing a "naive" attachment to photography and its "ordinary" practice. These "deviant" groups are studied in three separate chapters. "Aesthetic Ambitions and Social Aspirations: The Camera Club as A Secondary Group" by Castel and Schnapper outlines the workings of several camera clubs from different social milieux. All are distinguished by their desire to break away from the "common" uses of photography; but some are more concerned with issues of technical sophistication, while others focus more on the construction of

an autonomous aesthetic. In "Mechanical Art, Natural Art: Photographic Artists," Chamboredon writes on a very general level concerning the problematic aesthetic questions which face photographers as artists. Making familiar arguments about the legitimacy of this art in comparison to other more accepted, rule-bound forms, Chamboredon nevertheless provides some insights into the fact that the photograph is difficult to separate from the object it represents — problematizing its status as creation. The final chapter, "Professional Men or Men of Quality: Professional Photographers" co-authored by Chamboredon and Boltanski, looks at the various occupations which are considered part of the photographic "profession." In this study, they emphasize the fact that the profession is perceived by its members in diverse ways. It is asserted that differences in "social origin" account for many of the differences in the attitudes toward, and status within, the profession.

Published originally in 1965, the book has, for the most part, aged gracefully. Many of Bourdieu's general remarks on the practice of sociology and the practice of photography apply to contemporary academic issues, as well as the day-to-day activities of camera consumers. The introduction provides a very clear idea of Bourdieu's early theoretical positions concerning the practice of sociology and the study of photography in particular. Making the argument that sociology, "presupposes the overcoming of the false opposition arbitrarily erected by subjectivists and objectivists," (p.2) Bourdieu is able to account for the execution of his own analysis as both statistically or 'objectively' concrete and equally sensitive to the 'subjective experience,' which, in turn, determines and is determined by 'objective activity.' Such a study, he claims, would,

have to culminate in an analysis of the process by which objectivity becomes rooted in subjective experience: it must overcome it by encompassing the moment of objectivism and base it in a theory of the externalization of interiority and the internalization of exteriority. (p.5)

In order to provide a way of expressing the reciprocity and interdependency of this subjective/objective relation, Bourdieu refers to two terms which become central to much of his later work: *habitus* and *ethos*. These concepts stand for the manifest, but for the most part unconscious, integration or "internalization" of external practice or "objectivity." As a consequence, *habitus*, systems of durable unconscious dispositions, and *ethos*, systems of implicit values associated with membership of a particular group, are terms introduced here for the further elaboration of the social uses of photography. Photography, in this context, can be seen to be the visual site of particular human networks of value.

Unfortunately, the promising tenets of this methodology are not closely followed by the rest of the text. As recognized in Alain Touraine's review of 1965,² the text focuses on the practical rather than the metaphysical or psychological aspects of photographic production, thus emphasizing the more prosaic uses of the medium. Touraine aptly stresses, however, that the interesting aspect of the study is its rare choice of object (within the field of sociology) and the simultaneous ubiquity of such an activity as photography — allowing for a flexible analysis. It is this apparent commonality of practice, it seems, that provides Bourdieu with the opportunity to make certain generalizations which cross class boundaries; especially in the case of "family" image production.

Bourdieu places "the family" at the center of his discussion, claiming that it is this group which, more than any other, calls upon photographic practice as an instrument of integration.

...it becomes clear that photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, in short of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity. (p.19)

J.A. GONZÁLEZ IS CURRENTLY PURSUING HER DOCTORAL RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS BOARD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ. WITH A DEGREE IN PHILOSOPHY (B.A. YALE UNIVERSITY) AND AS HERSELF A VISUAL ARTIST (PHOTOGRAPHY, GRAPHIC DESIGN, PRINTMAKING), SHE HAS HAD A LONG-STANDING INTEREST IN THEORIES OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION. HER THESIS RESEARCH INCLUDES THE STUDY OF HOW THE PRIVATE COLLECTION AND ARRANGEMENT OF OBJECTS (SUCH AS SOUVENIRS, HEIRLOOMS, TOYS, PHOTOGRAPHS AND ALTARS) FUNCTION TO PRODUCE A VISUAL, SELF-REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY, MICROCOSMIC HISTORY AND MEMORY — A REPRESENTATION WHICH BOTH SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES THE PUBLIC STRUCTURE OF MUSEUMS AND OTHER FORMS OF DOMINANT PUBLIC HISTORIES.

Pointing out that the rituals of domestic unity existed long before photography, Bourdieu suggests that the early and widespread popularity of the medium was due, in part, to the unifying function it neatly fulfilled. The family stands, in this description, as that trans-social unit which is the focus of photography: "peasants" and "bourgeois" alike cannot resist the use of the camera to delineate their genealogy, to establish their social membership.

Although Bourdieu goes on to demonstrate the differences of attitude and choice which identify the class differences in the use and distribution of photography, he has a fairly consistent and somewhat idealized notion of agency. The *ethos* of the group may influence the acceptance of certain images, poses, and techniques but ultimately the individual is shown as having the right to deviate from the norm. Bourdieu's focus on family structure leaves out the many public, institutional, photographic practices which constitute social groupings of another kind. Certainly other social structures and networks have been, and continue to be, photographed regularly as a way of marking membership: school classes, sports teams, political parties, tourist groups, pornographic and fashion models, criminals, militia, medical subjects and anthropological subjects, to name a few. In each case the visual presence of the collective presupposes a collective experience, if not a collective ideology — but more importantly, the presence of *a collection of photographs of individuals* speaks of another kind of social integration. This integration does not take place on the level of voluntary, individual agency, rather it is the result of an institutional desire to collect and categorize which dates to the earliest uses of photography in the natural and social sciences, eugenics and criminology. In the present text, Bourdieu does not take such social uses of photography into account.

Still, Bourdieu is not blind to the fact that the practices of photography are as much defined by already existing photographic habits as they define them; that there is, therefore, a reciprocal construction of meaning; that the camera is a path through which the dialectic of image and identity passes. Images structure identity; identity structures image production, interpretation and acceptance. In his second chapter "The Social Definition of Photography," Bourdieu makes the important, indeed necessary, observation that, "Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective reading of the visible because (from its origin) it has been

assigned *social uses* that are held to be 'realistic' and 'objective'" (p.74). For this reason,

...in conferring upon photography a guarantee of realism, society is merely confirming itself in the tautological certainty that an image of the real which is true to its representation of objectivity is really objective. (p.77)

This observation clearly has an important resonance for any activity which uses photography as an 'objective' tool. For, as Bourdieu points out, there is nothing inherently objective about the medium — only that it claims to be and is accepted as such; "...here as elsewhere, the 'natural' is a cultural ideal which must be created before it can be 'captured'" (p.81).

The same is true of class structure. Certain habits, identities and attitudes are said to belong to the members of a particular "class." It thus becomes possible for Bourdieu to address the particular 'nature' of the photographic practices of certain groups identified by their occupations and incomes. *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, being one of his earlier works, unfortunately lacks some of the sophistication found in his later, well-known, studies of class 'distinction.' His use of the terms, 'peasant,' 'working class,' 'bourgeois,' 'senior executive,' etc. delimits specific research categories while leaving the choice of naming the categories unquestioned. This is not the case in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1983) where Bourdieu devotes much attention, for example, to the term 'popular,' problematizing any simple definition of the term. In this same text he writes that the social sciences,

...must examine the part played by words in the construction of social reality and the contribution which the struggle over classifications, a dimension of all class struggles, makes to the constitution of classes — classes defined in terms of age, sex or social position, but also clans, tribes, ethnic groups or nations... In short social science must include in its theory of the social world a theory of the theory *effect* which, by helping to impose a more or less authorized way of seeing the world helps to construct the reality of that world.³ (*my emphasis*)

Clearly, in this later book Bourdieu is able to delineate the more subtle and complex issues which arise in the

identification and naming of groups. Class separations and professional distinctions appear, in the present text, assumed instead of questioned and, whether the hierarchical ranking is understood as a social construction or not, it is not discussed openly as such. Of course, photography is used here to show one method by which class boundaries are drawn, suggesting that there *is* a concrete practice (rather than a natural selection) involved in the construction of individual and group identity. But there are certainly different ways that one might approach the question of the social uses of photography and, equally, there are different ways that groups can be identified: by age, gender, or location for example. Of course, one cannot construct an exhaustive study of all possible categorizations of photographic practice. The choices made nevertheless indicate the priorities of the author — in this case Bourdieu betrays his interest in class identifications. As a result, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* contains the germinations of ideas which will become the central focus of much of his later work.

Since it is included in the title, one might wonder at the definition of the term “middle-brow art.” The original French phrasing — “un art moyen” — has nearly the same significance as the English translation: an art which is medium, average, common. The translation “middle-brow” skillfully incorporates the two notions of “averageness” and “middle-class” to which Bourdieu alludes in his analysis. However, the only explicit discussion of the “middle-class” nature of photography for Bourdieu arises in a footnote which claims:

In order to indicate the place occupied by photography in what one might refer to as *middlebrow culture*, it will be enough to note that the readers of *Science et Vie*, of whom 44.1 per cent are members of the middle classes (as against 31.7 per cent from the upper classes and 24.2 per cent from the working classes) are distinguished by a very high level of photographic equipment: 91 per cent of them own at least one camera, and 27.5 per cent more than two cameras. (p.186)

Here ownership implies practice, which seems a problematic and simplified conclusion. In other parts of the text Bourdieu makes certain claims, less concretely outlined, that those people who use their cameras most — for family and leisure activities — maintain a middle-

range income. Still, this does not give the term “middle-brow” the fullness of its possible interpretation. What does it mean to call photography a “middlebrow art”? It implies that most “art” is not middlebrow but belongs to another class; it implies that photography is not, therefore, a true art (which is, in fact, a point made in one of the later chapters); it implies that those who practice photography as an art, regardless of their social status, are exercising a middlebrow practice; it might also suggest that for those who are already members of the “middle-class,” this is the artistic practice of choice. In fact, many of these interpretations are suggested, though not directly stated, by the text as a whole. The notion of “middlebrow” haunts Bourdieu’s and the other discussions as a kind of implication that only appears uncertainly and in rare cases.

The three other studies in the book address the question of “deviant” groups: clubs, artists and professionals. Again the choice of these groups betrays a certain interest in formally recognized and, in some sense, already socially sanctioned collectives. To the degree that these groups do not do ‘ordinary photography,’ they also are seen to conform to certain stereotyped behaviors. These last chapters are more descriptive than anything else, and do not attempt to delve into the subjective experience of the participants to the extent that Bourdieu’s analysis did. However, like Bourdieu’s study, these others have, to some degree, used the textual analyses of direct quotes as the basis of their discussion. Rather than giving a detailed synopsis of these chapters, the following discussion points to some issues which seem of interest.

Characteristically the members of camera clubs display a disdainful distaste for the naive practice of family portraiture, and, as a result, are in search of a ‘secondary legitimation’ (p.104). As previously mentioned, technical or aesthetic concerns become the focus of such groups — each club proclaiming that their aesthetic priorities are more sophisticated than the rest. This analysis of camera clubs can serve as a model for other cultural groups of legitimation. Castel and Shnapper observe that these groups, rather than following the status quo, establish their own systems of judgement which are no less anchored to a system of norms and accepted values. Consequently the individual appears to move from one community of membership to another, required to conform to the demands of the camera club instead of the family. The only really interesting thing about this example is that it gives substance to the more abstract

conception of group membership and the possible ways that this membership controls, not only aesthetic alliances, but habitual practices in general. Moreover, it appears that, in order to maintain the cohesion of the group, the rules of behavior must be more rigid than those which govern the activities of a more established group — such as the family. Ironically, the rejection of the limitations of 'ordinary' practice culminates in the construction of even more circumscribed boundaries. Clearly, although the authors do not make this argument explicitly, this model need not refer to the practice of photography alone but to any marginalized, rule-bound collective.

In contrast, the photographer as *artist* appears as an individual with an autonomous and arbitrary aesthetic. This autonomy, Chamboredon later asserts is no more than superficial. Emphasizing the problematic, universal to all photographer/artists, of legitimation, Chamboredon suggests that the question as to whether photography is a legitimate art form elicits an aesthetic discourse which functions as an authoritative reassurance of the medium's validity (p.131). He accounts for the ambiguous artistic status of the medium by claiming that it is due, for the most part, to the absence of an autonomous critical tradition and the lack of a unifying set of operations which constitute artistic photographic practice. Though there is still no single traditionally accepted mode of photographic criticism (the same could be said of the other arts), there have certainly been significant changes since Chamboredon's study. Today there are many photographer/artists whose work is respected as much as more traditional art forms. At the same time, it should be said that, as an art form, photography still faces difficulties in being valued as highly, say, as painting. (The very fact that the word "artist" must be modified by the word "photographer" above is a indication of this nebulous status.) Chamboredon's arguments are not new or surprising. The creativity of photographers is suspiciously regarded as subordinate to the demands of the other arts, he suggests, because the camera is so easily accessible and mechanically complex that its contribution to the finished work is seen as diminishing the role of the photographer.

Chamboredon's reading of photography is very uneven. For example he states that photography is,

...an expressive medium which is uncertain because it is unable to refer to a system of symbols, photog-

raphers must therefore seek the meaning of their photographs in valorized objects, and in the traditions which valorize them. (p.144)

The first part of the sentence is simply inaccurate in its assumption that other art forms are somehow more certain because of a particular and well-established symbolic system. Although this may be the case, it is not necessarily nor very often the case. Moreover, there are both enough traditional works of photography and systems of visual symbolic systems in popular culture to support the argument that photography has its own changing and varied system of symbols. Indeed, the very act of taking a photograph is an act of mediated semiosis, the creation of a symbolic signification⁴ — the object represented is not merely a "reproduction" of the original; a fact which is ignored by Chamboredon. The second half of the sentence, however, seems accurate. It might have been that, at one time, photography primarily relied upon the representation of valorized material objects, or *things*: today much photographic art practice rests on the representation of *ideas*, narrative, irony or metaphor. (Consider the works of Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, for example.) The fact that literary rather than material "objects" are being represented does not diminish the fact that they function through a tradition in which they are valorized — without this institutional sanction, the works which rely upon these visual tropes would not maintain the same social status.

Ultimately, Chamboredon's comes to much the same conclusion as the other writers: photographers as artists, regardless of their individual aesthetic, need the recognition of a group to succeed.

...the role of the group which recognizes and sanctions the artistic work seems to be essential. It is only through the group that the precedence and uniqueness of the work can be established: the merit of the work thus always seems to be recognized for reasons which lie outside itself." (p.149)

This is a straightforward enough assertion, it would seem, about any work of art; but in this case it is assumed only of photography, implying somewhat naively that the other arts are understood outside of a socialized interpretation. In keeping with this argument Chamboredon observes that all the artists he spoke with, "...at least agree in calling for a photographic museum,

a consecrated place for the preservation of consecrated works, because this generic consecration would at least justify the ambition of aesthetic creation through photography" (p.149). The emphasis placed upon the need for a sanctioned site reveals the dependency upon institutional recognition — true for any art — which photographers claim for themselves.

By the title alone, "Professional Men or Men of Quality: Professional Photographers," it is made clear in this final chapter, that women are not considered in the study whatsoever. While this is certainly more understandable coming from a text written thirty years ago than from any contemporary analysis, it is still surprising given the fact that women were not, even then, entirely excluded from the profession. (In fact, the photograph on the cover of the first issue of Life magazine was made by a woman — Margaret Bourke-White — who became nationally famous in the U.S. for her photo-journalism of WWII.) In addition, as stated by the authors, the "task of exhaustively and strictly defining the profession is a difficult one" (p.152). The eclecticism of the activities which could be called "professional photography" creates, especially for any kind of sociological study, serious problems of categorization. The chapter is thus composed of a kind of collage of observations and quotes from interviews that have no particular cohesion. Fortunately, however, the authors do not attempt to squeeze the "profession" into a tidy explanation. They prefer to point out those factors which seem most clearly to unify the membership of the "profession:" the fear of amateur competition, the diversity of social status and day-to-day practice, and the desire for the "profession" to be revalorized (p.173).

Photography: A Middle-brow Art is easy to read without, for the most part, being overly simplistic. Although some of the study was based on quantitative research, this is not foregrounded in the text, which, for the non-statistician, is a relief. The supporting evidence throughout the text primarily consists of direct citations of the interviewees. This provides some of the more entertaining reading in the book and functions to enliven the interpretive analysis which relies upon it. Of

course not surprisingly there are points where the arguments and examples constructed from the experience of France in the early 1960s do not at all apply to that of the United States in the 1990s. Later technological developments in film and camera production make, for example, arguments about the impact of the use of color film obsolete — while they perhaps enhance Bourdieu's comments concerning the fetishization of automation. Family structures, social customs, and professional activities which comprise much of the focus of the work, simply do not exist in the same form today (in France or the United States). With the important exception of Bourdieu's observation that mothers have often played the central role of family genealogist through the production and exchange of photographic images (p.22), the book does not address women as photographers or as photographed. Nor does it address many of the issues that are the current vogue in academic discourses concerning photography. However, it not only stands as an interesting analysis of practices and attitudes of a time past (productively testifying to the fact that social and intellectual progress has been made concerning issues of class and gender), it also reminds the reader of alternative approaches to the analysis of photographic practice. It reminds the reader that photography has been, and continues to be, an integral part of Western, post-industrial systems of social identification, consumption, and expression.

NOTES

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Trans. by Shaun Whiteside. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1990. p.6.
- 2 Alain Touraine, "Comptes Rendue," in *Sociologie du Travail*, vol.7 (4), Oct./Dec. 1965. P. 428-429.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Ed. John B. Thompson. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 1991. p. 105 and p.106.
- 4 For discussion of this, see *Thinking Photography*. Ed. Victor Burgin. London: Macmillan. 1982.