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Fieldwork in aesthetics:
On comics' social legitimacy

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A sociology of comics that includes the analysis of their aesthetics deviates from conventional studies of comics. It is usually limited to the analysis of distribution and circulation, and above all the readers' market. In a nutshell, it is the analysis of comics' social function but not their aesthetics. This naturalized understanding of the sociology of comics is confirmed by aesthetics. For instance, Maurice Horn writes in the introduction to his *World Encyclopedia of Comics* (1999: 55) that it is vital now to develop an understanding of the aesthetics of comics in order to dismiss the mere sociology of comics. Indeed, sociological analyses of cultural goods that tend to inundate their readers with statistics exhibit a limited conception of aesthetics.

Every field of cultural production holds the possibility to create an aesthetically unique position with strong influences upon the whole field. Such an impact is not to be understood solely by quantitative, statistical methods (Bourdieu 1979: 16). In this regard, a sociology of cultural production needs qualitative research as well, making use of interviews with authors, distributors and critics in combination with statistical and historical methods. Even a unique position is relative, that is, socially related to other positions, and thus requires a methodology which allows for its objectification in a sociological way.

Both Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu agree (Bourdieu 1994: 63-65) that strategies and conflicts are *intrinsic* aspects of cultural goods. Whereas in Foucault's theory of power there is no place for discursive autonomy, Bourdieu maintains that

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autonomy in cultural production is an effect of strategies and conflicts. According to Bourdieu, a "field" is not a semantic field of discourse but of symbolic strategies (Bourdieu 1996: 185-186, 313-321). His "field sociology" suggests understanding aesthetic creation as something fundamentally *social*, which means that not only the reception of artworks but even before that, their production is determined by *social conflicts*. Every single artwork is the manifestation of a strategy in relation to other artworks within the same field. But these strategies are not characterized by a complete freedom in position-taking; rather, they are historically determined by a specific range of possibilities. For instance, it is not likely that an author like Art Spiegelman would hold a job in Walt Disney's workshop because their positions within the field of comics are too different.

Every position within a field is characterized by a specific distribution of symbolic capital in relation to other positions. The fact that one actor in the respective field has more cultural capital than another may play a trump in the struggle over positions. This implies that no one is completely dominated because the power within the field is not constructed like a pyramid. On the pole of economic capital (fig. 1), actors hold positions with greater cultural capital, and on
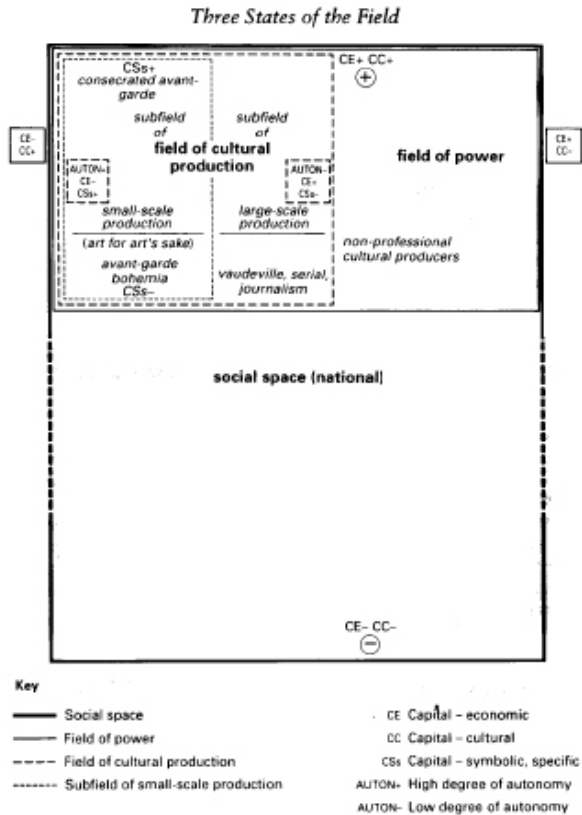

Fig. 1: Pierre Bourdieu: *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford: University Press 1995.

the pole of cultural capital they hold positions of greater economic capital. Needless to say, there can be many gradations between the two poles. Proximity or distance to other positions forms the structure which serves as the precondition for strategies to enhance or to preserve one's position in the field (Bourdieu 1994: 69-72). Every position must be seen as a structural distribution of symbolic capital in relation to other distributions or structures of symbolic capital. After having realized this structure of symbolic capital, the researcher can investigate the homologies of these positions with symbolic forms, that is, their aesthetics.

In the mass market, the demand for profit dominates everything. In the market of small-scale production, the demand for innovation is crucial; therefore, this pole can be called a *symbolic* market. In the 1980s, when Art Spiegelman brought together American, Japanese and European comics artists in his avant-garde journal *RAW*, Jerry Moriarity experienced the following:

> We all worked for nothing because Art (Spiegelman) made no money after production costs. […] The point wasn't the money or the career, but the desire to see your work published in the best possible way (Kartapoulos 2005, internet).

A statement like this indicates the existence of two different markets and therefore two opposing poles of economic and cultural capital in the field of comics production. But such a statement in an interview can also be traced back to the strategy of the interviewed person. It is quite possible that the interviewee pretends to be on the pole of the symbolic market in order to get acknowledged by the interviewer. There is only one possibility to objectify the interviewee's statement, by considering sales figures as well as the existence of social groups within the small-scale production market. Spiegelman's *RAW* obviously fostered the formation of such a social group. The journal triggered the mutual recognition of artists within the market of worldwide avant-garde creators.

During the first half of the 20th century, there was no clear distinction between the two markets. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern positions inclined towards either cultural autonomy or profit. Especially noteworthy is the *relation* between

positions, which changes according to the antagonism of economic and symbolic values. Although Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* were appreciated as aesthetically innovative comics, both artists depended on syndicates, as did so many of their colleagues prior to the 1960s. Consequently, McCay as well as Herriman should be regarded as individual cases rather than as typical representatives of a symbolic market. In contrast, a comics author like Robert Williams, who in the 1960s contributed to Crumb's magazine *Zap* (that can be seen as a first step of comics production towards small-scale production) remembers:

> When I got to meet *Zap* artists, for the first time in my life I had run across spirits who went through the same thing I did. They could draw but were denied any standing in art schools. (Williams: internet).

His words confirm that the network characteristic of American underground comix must be regarded as a social group, whose members recognized each other as distinct from the legitimate institutions as well as the mass market.

To diagnose a position, it also helps to know the sales figures. For example, Art Spiegelman's avant-garde journal *RAW* had a print run of only five thousand copies. It belonged to a small-scale production, a symbolic market rejecting the aesthetics of superheroes. Yet, it should not be assumed that a small circulation always indicates high quality and, reversely, a mass-market distribution low quality. In other words, the success of *MAUS*, with a circulation of half a million copies in the U.S. alone does not substantiate poor quality. However, neither is success an argument against the difference between cultural and economic capital, because the artist's position-taking must be seen as a dynamic habitus-related process. If that is the case, we have to take into account the trajectory of the author's career. One should not forget that the accumulation of symbolic capital (see the vertical axis in fig. 1) forms the temporal axis of the habitus, that is, the specific course of an individual's career in the field. Art Spiegelman, for example, began publishing *MAUS* in his journal *RAW* in 1980, but its success did not set in before 1987. Within the symbolic market, immediate success is rare. Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* had been ignored by the mass market for a

long time; it was first published by independent publishers and only 20 years later by a major company.

An example of misinterpretation, which fails to consider the dynamism of strategies, is the French journalist Didier Pasamonik. He suggested that there cannot be comics beyond the mass market (2008: 13-19). As an example he took Marjane Satrapi's famous *Persepolis* published by the alternative publisher L'Association, yet surprisingly successful on the mass market. Pasamonik argued (without indicating any sources) that the editorial department did not unanimously accept Marjane Satrapi's comic, allegedly because it looked too popular. With this argument he sought to make his claim that comics were always tied to the mass market. According to him, the editors' rejection of *Persepolis* was against the intrinsic value of comics and therefore a faulty strategy in light of the fact that all the other comics published by L'Association were not profitable at all; comics proper could eventually function only as a media of entertainment. This certainly is a projection of his taste on the editors' position which he seemed to describe. During interviews with some of them, I was told that the editorial board unanimously accepted Satrapi's work. Noticing only the successful result and not the dynamic strategies which lead to it, Pasamonik passed over the difference between the two markets.

Interviews in combination with documents make it possible to reconstruct the *double* history of both the comics field and its authors. Otherwise the strategies which generate innovations could not be understood. How specific capital is accumulated is indicative of a career's *dynamic trajectory*, not just a static position. One has to ask, when an individual entered the field, how long he or she worked within it, and what she or he did before. Did he or she work only in this specific field, or was it initially a subsidiary project? What kind of strategies made it possible to reach the present position or hindered that progress? Such questions allow one to understand the dynamics of professionalization in relation to other positions and their timing.

A common error concerning the theory of habitus is to think that a specific position in the field completely determines a habitus (Bourdieu 1984b: 211). The habitus is a system of several elements, and a specific position in the field provides only a high probability to discern certain elements of a disposition at a certain time.

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Some elements may be missing, or very individual elements, which cannot be found elsewhere, do exist. Habitus is neither a habit nor a completely determined structure; otherwise, the concept of habitus would be nonsense. Bourdieu created this concept in order to understand more clearly how innovations are possible within given structures which precede each individual. A productive habitus is determined by its position, and at the same time it is able to redetermine its position in a new way. Once this is admitted, the opposition between a theory of system and a theory of action becomes obsolete.

The above-mentioned case of Pasamonik, the journalist who misread L'Association, shows that a consideration of authors is not sufficient. The habitus and taste of the researcher, who interprets another habitus, must also be taken into account in sociological terms. We do not simply understand a position by interpretation, but by interpreting other interpretations, something which Anthony Giddens termed "double hermeneutics". Double hermeneutics, however, do not allow for unlimited constructivism. During interviews, there will always be the risk of projecting the interviewer's habitus on the interviewee's habitus. It goes without saying that projection cannot be avoided, simply because prejudices are a prerequisite of any understanding. What can be done is to objectify the difference in habitus in a dynamic way. Bourdieu calls not only for a participant observation but an *objectified* participation; in field research, the researcher has to be aware of his own position in relation to the position of the investigated person. The same methodology used to investigate other persons must be applied to oneself (Bourdieu 1984a: 69). Like a psychoanalyst, the sociologist has to objectify himself and to realize that his own position and his own habitus is the source of projections on the habitus of the interviewed person.

This leads us to the main difficulty in understanding comics in both an aesthetic *and* social way. It derives from the different social status which is attached to education and scholarship on the one hand, and the production of comics on the other. The hierarchy of legitimacy created by the general and long-term power of institutional education in the modern nation-state cannot be circumvented (Bourdieu 1979: 21-31). For example, it is notable that literature and theatre, which usually take the highest position in culture, do not require any justification of their specific aesthetic

experiences (Bourdieu 1979: 367-381). Legitimate art forms such as these tend to exclude popular art from educational and academic consideration. A lesser legitimacy in art production means that there is no support by academic consecration. However, it is precisely this which makes such art forms readily accessible.

Comics (like other cultural goods of industrial production) provide immediate pleasure. Fans do not need to know the *history* of comics or the specific techniques of their creation in order to enjoy them. By contrast, people who want to be taken seriously within the institution of art are expected to have art-historical knowledge. Because of its long tradition of history-construction, legitimate art is able to dominate the way in which the history of the "illegitimate" arts is being written. For example, when, in the 1960s, the first comics exhibition based on thorough historical research was held in France, its display was fundamentally influenced by the contemporaneous Pop Art. Single panels were blown-up to large-sized pictures deprived of their context, that is, the respective narrative sequences (Martin and Mercier 2005: 90). Apparently, a symbolic similarity of legitimate art and popular art tends to trigger a misunderstanding of the aesthetics of the latter. It produces a false recognition of so-called "high art" which leads to misjudging the specific value of lesser legitimate art. Thus, "illegitimate" art has to struggle not only in publicizing the knowledge of its history, but also for its own way to construct this history. The difference between the levels of legitimacy is therefore an objective structure determining normative judgments and practices. Some comics authors try to avoid every contact with scholarly field research because they fear the legitimate status of a scholar, or they have no interest in a purely academic interview that gives them no possibility to accumulate symbolic or economic capital. Lewis Trondheim for example, one of the best known authors of independent comics in France, wrote to me that he refuses to give interviews because he thinks himself not to be representative.

But a reserved attitude of comics artists towards scholars is sometimes justified. Not rarely do intellectuals use less legitimate art for a distinction in their own legitimate field of scholarship. The knowledge of less legitimate symbolic forms can serve as a means to distinguish oneself from academism. This is actually an aesthetic strategy which was first used by Pop artists quoting comics. They took over forms of

less legitimate art in order to distinguish themselves from dominating positions in the art world. By emphasizing popular taste as good taste, they declared the good taste of the elitist position in their field to be bad taste. In this way, they claimed to be a new avant-garde beyond the conventional system of academia but still accepted by the field of power.

This genuinely aesthetic strategy does not include an objective approach towards why the artists were interested in popular aesthetics. Art production does not need an objectification of its own practices, as distinct from scholarly research for which it is indispensable. With such awareness, research strategies of investigation would get confused with aesthetic strategies. Ethnological studies know the problem of the researcher's fear in front of the otherness of his field. However, facing less legitimate art forms of one's own society involves an inverse danger; that of exaggerating the otherness of these forms in order to distinguish oneself from the naturalized academic notions in one's own field. Such a confusion can be found very often in postmodern discourses, especially when avant-garde positions are aspired. For example, the late Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida claimed to diminish the difference between art and art theory in order to become prophets of a new theoretical avant-garde.

Scott McCloud, who is well known for his semiotic theory of comics, may serve as a good example of such postmodern errors. In his book *Understanding Comics*, he presents a system that is supposed to work for both legitimate art, such as paintings by Claude Monet, and comics (McCloud 1993: 45-57). This results in the avant-garde comic *MAUS* holding almost the same position as the mainstream comic Mickey Mouse (McCloud 1993: 56). McCloud himself acknowledges that this is strange, because he knows of course that comics for children and the comics of the American underground are quite different things. By denying the difference of legitimacy between comics and oil paintings of the 19th century, the specific value of the avant-garde in comics production is left unexplained. Semiotic theory often treats comics as a system in order to give them more weight. The more the analysis follows a logical system, the more it seems to support institutionally legitimized scholarship. By omitting the strategic struggle for qualification, definition and legitimacy, semiotics may easily make comics appear like a system without any historical evolution.

But there is another problem with "double hermeneutics" in interviews. Every biographical storytelling shows an inclination to a consistent view of life. If an author is asked about the influence of his family, it can happen that he reconstructs a continuous biography at the very moment of his answer (Bourdieu 1994: 81-89). The famous pianist Horrowitz, for example, claimed that he destroyed a fiddle when he was a young child. Maybe he did, but he said this in an interview in order to justify the continuity of his artistic life from his childhood onwards. This is precisely what is called the illusion of an "uncreated creator" (Bourdieu 1996: 185). It would be completely wrong, however, to objectify this illusion during an interview. Because the habitus is an implicit understanding of the world, the goal of the interview cannot be to interrogate the interviewee directly about this disposition of his own habitus. Only after the interview, the interviewer has to break with these illusions.

Because the vertical axis is a temporal one which shows the accumulation of symbolic capital (see fig.1), we must include family contacts or other persons that could have encouraged the progress of a career. Are there contacts within the field favored by family? Bourdieu calls this reproduction of cultural capital a "social heritage" because it does not appear as a reproduction at first sight, thus fueling the illusion of the "uncreated creator" (Bourdieu 1984a: 75). The transfer of symbolic capital within a family seems to be an act of intimate communication. At school this accumulation of capital is appreciated very often as innate talent. In less legitimate art, we rarely find such social heritage, and it is a specifically democratic element of popular culture that such a social heritage does not exist.

In the biography of present comics authors, at least in the present generation of the independent comics authors in France, there is a perceivable element of social heritage. The French author David B. said that his parents were graphic artists. Even if he denies any direct influence on his career, they certainly gave him some information about the formation of an artist at graphic schools. The pre-school reproduction of cultural capital plays another role here that it doesn't in the case of legitimate art; it increases the self-confidence of an author against the hierarchy of legitimacy.

Fields of lower legitimacy are more easily accessible, because a specific historical knowledge is not necessary. But this accessibility involves the risk of a very low

income for many in the early stages. The main way to accumulate a specific knowledge in fields with little institutional backup is to create one's own social contacts and to observe how other actors manage to earn their living. This kind of learning serves as a quasi-institution. The lack of institutionalization forces authors in less legitimate fields to work not only for their cultural, but also social capital. Consequently, the time of daily life without art production is very small for every author, sometimes to such an extent that intimate contacts become completely impossible. Nothing is as volatile as social capital. It is the most risky capital. That is, the capital with the highest rate of inflation because of the continuous possibility of ungratefulness. In interviews, time and biography of formation deserve special attention. As a general principle, one should not look for *rules* of a biography, but strategies to be recognized in a specific field.

How does the distinction of the two markets determine aesthetic strategies? I can give only some short examples here. Autonomy does not simply mean freedom. Although the autonomous pole of the comics field is able to restrict the influence of economic demands, it also establishes a symbolic force. To be in the field is to distinguish oneself from others by means of symbolic production. Every new avant-garde generation is therefore forced to distinguish itself not only from the mass market but also from the former avant-garde generation as well.

Whereas Robert Crumb, the representative of the first generation of the American comics avant-garde in the 1960s, attacked the mass market with shocking cartoons, Art Spiegelman, a representative of the second generation, has refused to do this in his comics since the 1980s. He avoided Crumb's subjective empathy by focusing on the narrative structure and thus reinvented a "cool description" for *MAUS*. This program of "cool authorship", which is his achievement in regard to pictorial narratives, can truly be called a reinvention because it has been characteristic for modern narratives since Gustave Flaubert "invented" the social novel (although Flaubert as distinct from Spiegelman strictly refused the addition of illustrations to novels). Chris Ware, a representative of the third generation, added the color of the *ligne claire* style to the cool description in order to distinguish himself from Spiegelman. Although Spiegelman belongs to Ware's generation in terms of his biological age, his symbolic age according

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to his position and its aesthetic effects in the field is clearly different.

When I asked a L'Association author whether comics were literature or art, he replied, "*literature, because there are signs*". This answer cannot be accepted at face value, but should rather be regarded as an effect of his aesthetic strategy in the field. Generally speaking, it is clearly mistaken, since images provide signs as well. But from the standpoint of an author's position in the field which favors a certain strategy, his answer can be understood as a disposition to affirm the value of independent production which aims programmatically at *readable* comics. This is a distinction against the previous avant-garde generation, especially Moebius, Enki Bilal and other artists of the magazine *Métal Hurlant* who favored the visual aspects of comics and their intermediality with cinema.

But the above-mentioned answer reveals a second strategic dimension on closer inspection. Bearing in mind that discourse theories have dominated aesthetic theories of legitimate literature since the 1970s, the author's answer obviously tries to enhance the status of comics as legitimate literature. At the same time, it points to the aesthetics of the new avant-garde in France. The comics of L'Association are in black and white as if they were nothing but the text of a written book. This may serve as an example of how constitutive strategies are for the meaning of cultural goods. Semiotic analysis is a new method to understand comics but it does not allow for an understanding of their aesthetics in a dynamic way, which necessarily includes an analysis of social strategies and historical struggles for legitimacy.

Since the 1960s, there have been three generations of comics authors in the symbolic market, at least in the U.S. and in France. They have been able to reproduce their knowledge about the innovations of comics production continuously. This evolution has been accompanied, of course, by specialized critics, magazines such as *The Comics Journal* in the U.S. and *Cahiers des Bandes Dessinées* in France, and by publishers such as the French Futuropolis which first re-edited George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*. Such re-editions were vital to the creation of a recognizable history of the comics field. The more autonomous a field of symbolic production is, the more it can exclude persons without a specific expertise of the field-history. This leads finally to another social difficulty which needs to be overcome.

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In the U.S. and in France, a clear distinction between the above-mentioned two markets of comics production did not exist until the 1960s. During the first half of the 20th century, the knowledge of the pioneers of independent comics was distributed only in an oral way. However, it was rediscovered in the 1960s when the symbolic market emerged, and in the 1970s critics generated a historical awareness of outstanding independent comics. To Art Spiegelman, for example, elaborated comics of the early 20th century, such as Lyonel Feininger's works, formed the basis of contemporary independent comics. On closer inspection, his view can be described as an aesthetic strategy to select elements for a complex language of comics from the field's history. But here again, we have to differentiate between scholarly research and aesthetic strategies. An artist's aesthetic reference to the field's history is necessarily different from a researcher's account. Seen from a sociological standpoint, there is no continuous series of elaborated comics from the beginning to the end of the 20th century. However, field sociology traces a strategy such as Spiegelman's to construct a continuity of elaborated comics throughout the 20th century back to his break with the social conditions of producing comics for a mass market. A semiotic analysis without sociological objectification sees only the symbolic similarity and therefore the continuity between the pioneers of elaborated comics and the authors of independent comics in our time. But in order to understand comics as a *dynamic field*, it is necessary to consider social strategies as constitutive elements for symbolic forms. If we interpret these strategies as constitutive elements of a process of autonomization and struggles for legitimacy, we do not disapprove of them. We rather try to take them seriously by objectifying them as genuine aesthetic practices.

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