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New directions and new discoveries in the sociology of the arts

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This special issue aims to develop the strong program's contribution to the sociological study of the arts and to place this in conversation with other cultural perspectives in the field. It marks a new stage in the project to construct a meaningful sociology of the arts that moves beyond production perspectives and their limiting focus on the social organization of artistic endeavors.

The field of cultural sociology has progressed considerably since Ron Eyerman and I began this project by challenging sociologists of the arts to take meaning seriously (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006). The strong program has undergone the iconic turn (Alexander et al., 2013; Alexander, 2010; Alexander, 2008). Civil sphere theory has globalized (Alexander and Tognato, 2018; Alexander et al., 2019b; Alexander et al., 2019a) and informed a new general model of social crisis (Alexander, 2018). Cultural trauma theory has expanded empirically and analytically (Eyerman et al., 2016). Methodological debates have raged (Reed and Alexander, 2009) and principles for measuring culture have been proposed (Mohr et al., 2020). The arts are no longer seen as a frivolous topic in American sociology, bringing the discipline more in line with its European counterparts (Zolberg, 2015). Sociologists of the arts who define their work in relation to art history (e.g., Heinich, 2012; Witkin, 1995) and musicology (Martin, 2006; DeNora, 2003) have gradually become outnumbered by those who research the "creative industries" and orient themselves toward cultural policy (e.g., Brook et al., 2020) and economics (e.g., Menger, 2014; Velthuis, 2013). The digital world has become a central feature of music sociology, enabling it to keep pace with rapid and extensive technological developments (e.g., Prey, 2016; Nowak, 2016; Spilker, 2018).

And yet very little has changed. Production perspectives remain firmly entrenched in the sociology of the arts. Calls are repeatedly issued to bring the artwork back in (e.g., Alexander and Bowler, 2018; de la Fuente, 2007), to make music sociology more musical (e.g., Marshall, 2011; McCormick, 2012), and to move beyond Bourdieu (e.g., Born, 2010;

de Boise, 2016; Beljean et al., 2016), but these have only made a dent. The stubborn dependence on the conceptual frameworks of Bourdieu and Becker endures, and the steady stream of cultural omnivore studies shows little sign of abating.

Briefly, a new path started to open through Hennion's work on mediation and amateurs of music (Hennion, 2001; Hennion, 2005; Hennion, 2015[2007]), which suggested alternative theoretical starting points from science and technology studies (STS). The obsession with conventions and cultural capital was interrupted by scholars exploring how intense emotional attachments to art forms are developed (Benzecry, 2011; Benzecry and Collins, 2014), and how associations between the material and the social take shape through artistic creativity (Klett and Gerber, 2014; Strandvad, 2012; Rubio, 2012). But this path was never allowed to lead too far from familiar territory. Others devised ways to bolster Bourdieusian frameworks with actor-network theory (e.g., Lang, 2019; Herrero, 2010; Prior, 2008), diluting any threat posed by Hennion's version of STS.

Stagnation has unfortunately set into the sociology of the arts, and it persists for two reasons. First, the "critical stream" in the field has yet to subject itself to the reflexive self-criticism that Inglis (2010) warned is necessary for it to confront the dogmatic and imperialistic tendencies inherent in its analytic dispositions. For Inglis, what drives the "critical stream" is an abiding "concern with 'exposing' the 'hidden' power relations that structure particular art worlds and which affect, more or less strongly, the functioning of the various players within them" (Inglis 2010, p. 119). The chief example of the "critical stream" is Bourdieu, but he is hardly alone. Inglis demonstrates how the feminist sociology of art, the production of culture perspective, Becker's art worlds approach, and Raymond Williams' cultural materialism all share a determination to "'liberate' artistic producers and consumers from their deluded beliefs and power-ridden practices" (Inglis 2010, p. 120). So far, the "critical stream" has avoided the question of what purpose a critique of art worlds should

serve, even as new strands are added to the stream. While Bourdieu remains a guiding light, Adorno has suffered the opposite fate. He was a pioneering critical sociologist of the arts who never lost sight of that question. But because his answers were found wanting, he became an embarrassing but useful fossil to trot out periodically for demonstrating how much progress has been made.

The second factor contributing to stagnation has to do with what Reed (2009) called an “intuitive distinction” concerning the importance of culture to sociology. As he explains, culture can be an object of study, which involves investigations “of what has been thought and said, and of the produced cultural artifacts of this or that society” using the standard sociological methods and theories (Reed 2009, p. 1–2). Or culture can be the approach for examining standard sociological topics, emphasizing their symbolic dimensions. This intuition has become an ingrained habit in sociology, encouraging everyone to “stay in their lane.” Sociologists who study cultural objects, such as art and music, concentrate on the typical sociological concerns of taste, markets, and careers, leaving aside any questions to do with meaning. And sociologists who adopt a cultural approach continue to neglect artistic domains and gravitate towards politics, the mass media, and social crises to develop their ideas about social facts and processes. Those who diverge from these well-worn paths risk getting stranded on the median strip.

The articles in this special issue display the benefits and rewards of taking a cultural approach to cultural objects and artistic endeavors. A narrow focus on art and music was chosen not to restrict the definition of “the arts”, but to emphasize and develop the range of cultural approaches available. The collection features studies where the tools of the strong program are used alone (Zelinsky) and in combination with theorists as different as Baudrillard (Whitaker & Greenland) and Bourdieu (Picaud). In addition to several varieties of discourse analysis (Hanrahan, Wohl, Zelinsky), the issue also includes two articles that

move beyond texts to consider atmospheres and materiality in urban contexts (Harris, Picaud). Empirical investigations of art and music in the United States (Hanrahan, Whitaker & Greenland, Wohl), Czechoslovakia (Zelinsky), the United Kingdom (Harris) and France (Picaud) are complemented by a disciplinary history of the French sociology of art (Heinich). What unites these diverse contributions is the centrality of meaning in the sociological analyses they develop.

The opening article by Hanrahan lays bare just how much is at stake in debates about and around music in the United States. She not only punctures any remaining optimism about digital democratization, but also reveals how scholars and commentators alike have unwittingly settled for a formal definition of inclusion based on network protocols rather than a substantive one where the terms are established “through contestation and moral decisions about justice, equality and the collective good.” Her chosen approach for developing this argument is the Marcusean device of revisiting history, not to yearn for a bygone age or to trace a genealogy, but to “break the grip of the present on our imaginations and remind us of alternatives to current ways of thinking.” The wake-up call is achieved by examining historical debates over American music to demonstrate that the meaning of democracy is negotiated through and anchored in the social conditions of the time. In the nineteenth century, classical music served as the battle ground for concerns about democratic culture and national identity, while arguments over jazz in the twentieth century engaged the very same issues at the heart of the civil rights movement (i.e., social and political recognition, racial equality and freedom). Current debates over the digitization of music are hollow in comparison. This state of affairs would be less troubling were it not for a gradual shift towards libertarianism in music discourse; concerns about individual empowerment and unlimited personal choice abound, precluding any discussion of social justice. In the best tradition of critical theory, Hanrahan does not offer easy answers or ready-made solutions.

Instead, she dares music scholars to fashion new grounds for critique suitable for the digital age so that better questions can be raised about how and why music matters. In an important sense, Hanrahan's discussion shows that the need has only become more urgent for the "critical stream" to find a purpose for the critique of art worlds since Inglis (2010) first raised this uncomfortable issue.

Historical debates over jazz also feature in Zelinsky's contribution, but in the context of Stalinist Czechoslovakia. Combining a strong program approach with the notion of the "impure sacred" (Kurakin, 2015), Zelinsky not only corrects the standard narrative that the Communist party banned jazz for political reasons; he also persuasively demonstrates that cultural processes can overpower the most extreme manifestations of institutional control. Zelinsky reconstructs the Stalinist cultural system informing music criticism during this period, explaining how the combination of its core principles produced terrible inconsistencies and contradictions while also pressuring artists to play a crucial function in society as "engineers of the human soul" who would "lead the people." These were treacherous conditions for artists and musicians to navigate, whatever the genre or tradition in question. Jazz, however, presented a particular difficulty, and not only because of its popularity. The problem with jazz is that it was ambiguous. For some commentators it was an "utterly polluting" profane musical genre because it was quintessentially American and therefore represented decadence, immorality, and greed. Others defended jazz, pointing to its origins as the music of the oppressed Black proletariat. They believed that jazz retained traces of the sacred and proposed various methods for reversing the polluting distortions of American capitalism. Zelinsky describes how a moral panic over the jazz-loving youth subculture *pásci* temporarily gave the jazz-deniers the upper hand, but jazz-redeemers eventually triumphed. The Stalinist cultural system disintegrated after the death of Stalin, allowing purification efforts to begin and a "people's jazz" to emerge.

Controversy also erupts in today's contemporary art market, where global finance is transforming the meaning of art and the social relations around it. New developments call for new analytical tools. Whitaker and Greenland innovate by combining cultural sociology, economic sociology, and art market analysis to construct a theoretical model for a new kind of scandal. They focus on the case of Inigo Philbrick, a dashing young art dealer who admitted to committing aggravated identity theft and wire fraud in 2021. While his crimes were not especially egregious, they are instructive in how they reveal the dynamics and structural vulnerabilities of the art market. When artworks become an asset class and ownership of art is split into shares, the holy trinity of dealer–artist–buyer splinters into a loose chain of investors who need not know each other let alone anything about art. Whitaker and Greenland develop the concept of the “financial simulacrum” to explain how securitization compounds the impurity of art's commodification by fracturing the financial integrity of the art object and creating opportunities for art market insiders to be betrayed. But the financial simulacrum is not only a structural condition; it must be sustained (and exploited) through the effective social performance of intrepid dealers like Philbrick. Not just anyone can bridge artistic and economic worlds with such finesse. Being an effective intermediary demands the cultivation of a persona with the right combination of characteristics, which the authors summarize as “hydroponic, validated, novel yet neutral, and self-pardoning.”

According to Whitaker and Greenland, every artwork has both an artistic and a financial nature, which is how artworks can support both hermeneutical and commercial interpretations of value, even if these are sometimes in tension. Wohl's article concerns the artistic nature of artworks and how hermeneutical interpretations of them are accomplished in contemporary art criticism. As regular readers of art reviews will know, the genre is often an aesthetic experience in itself. Critics who have honed their craft present reflections and

interpretations every bit as evocative and indeterminate as the exhibitions they describe. Through the content analysis of 377 art reviews covering shows in New York City, Wohl constructs a typology of the metaphorical devices appearing in reviews, and she illustrates how critics use them to focus cognitive attention and direct aesthetic experience. In the first type, niche and lineage metaphors place artists in art history narratives and map influences on their work. The second and third types provide an interpretive infrastructure for making sense of artworks across an exhibition, either by juxtaposing two opposing meanings, or by proposing configurations of multiple meanings. Wohl suggests that metaphors are such effective instruments in the critic's literary toolkit because they are more suggestive than prescriptive. Metaphors sometimes support evaluations, but their more typical functions are instructional and communicative. Critics use metaphors to demonstrate ways of creating relations between the meanings within or across artworks, leaving it to their readers to decide whether these are guides, resources, or foils for formulating their own interpretations of the art.

Two articles in this special issue attend to the material environments where people engage with art and music. In Picaud's case this involves investigating the physical layout of music venues in Paris, France as well as examining the role of the bookers of musicians who, as cultural intermediaries, shape the performances that happen in these spaces. Taking a cue from Solaroli and Santoro (2016), Picaud combines the strong program's performance perspective (McCormick, 2006; Alexander, 2004) with Bourdieusian field theory into one theoretical framework. These approaches are typically seen as diametrically opposed, but Picaud finds a point of connection in the concept of re-fusion. She argues that the alignment of the elements of performance can be understood as an effective embodiment of the "rules of the game" defining a given musical field, whether this is to celebrate or subvert them. The Bourdieusian side of Picaud's analysis is displayed in her use of Multiple Correspondence

Analysis to reveal how the Parisian music scene is structured by the pure/impure binary, firstly in terms of music's importance in a building's design and everyday functioning, and secondly in how listeners engage with music in these spaces. This relational analysis of the Parisian scene provides the context for a discussion of bookers, which is where the strong program side of the analysis comes through. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observations, Picaud shows how bookers sometimes experiment with programming, presenting established musical forms in new ways or mixing genres thought to be worlds apart. Some of these unusual concerts are enjoyed but then quickly forgotten, while others break new artistic ground. According to Picaud, the success of these ventures depends not only on what the architecture facilitates, but also on the inventiveness of bookers to turn concert halls into cultural destinations of note.

Just as Picaud looks past musicians to focus on the places where they perform, Harris puts artworks aside to concentrate on the gallery as an architectural form. In her view, sociologists have unnecessarily restricted their investigations of art galleries to the meanings generated through visitors' interactions and the discourses about the artworks displayed. Building on textural sociology (de la Fuente, 2019) and the strong program's icon theory (Alexander, 2010), Harris argues that cultural approaches should broaden their remit to include the spatial, temporal and sensory registers of meaning which "overlap, compete and co-exist" in the gallery. This involves examining the place-based "context" of a gallery's location in the city and explaining how the design of the building's external façade and interior spaces create an "atmosphere" conducive to engaging with art. Exploring context and atmosphere empirically requires some methodological innovation. Harris uses her experience as a filmmaker to document the sensory aspects of her chosen fieldsite, the Bluecoat Arts Centre in Liverpool, UK. Her analysis shows how windows, as an architectural feature, can function as a material locus for the negotiation of meaning. Gallery windows provide a

porous boundary between zones of social activity, inviting the gaze of passersby while also filtering out sound and light for gallery visitors touring the exhibition. The shape and size of the gallery windows, as well as the type of glass installed, are also significant; they reflect architectural values, reference commercial development logics, and influence curatorial decisions about the placement of art objects in the gallery space. As Harris demonstrates, there is much for sociologists to see through windows.

In the closing article, Nathalie Heinich, the *grande dame* of French sociology, provides an illuminating survey of the sociology of art in France. This is no ordinary literature review. In addition to covering dozens of studies unavailable in English translation, this discussion offers a “personal take” on the field’s history from one of its most prolific and influential figures (for an introduction to Heinich’s work see Danko, 2008). Heinich traces the development of the field over three generations and through a succession of “turns.” She describes how a sociology of art deserving of the name only emerged in the 1960s by breaking away from art history. Autonomy was achieved by employing rigorous empirical methods to investigate not only artworks, but audiences, producers, and intermediaries as well, initially in the traditional fine arts and then in more popular forms. These origins were consequential; the commitment to empirical research made at the outset spawned an epistemological division between positivist and interpretive sociology. This rift involved more than a disagreement over whether to use quantitative or qualitative methods. Because of Bourdieu, positivist sociology became coupled with a critical perspective that emphasized domination and hierarchy in its explanations. In contrast, the interpretivist sociology Heinich spearheaded remained value neutral. It sought to understand values, motivations, and collective representations rather than dismiss them as illusions; taking inspiration from Elias’ figurational sociology (Elias, 1993; Elias and Schröter, 2001), it emphasized context and interdependence. Sociologists of art frustrated with the limitations of the Bourdieusian

paradigm have also turned towards pragmatism, either in its Latourian variety, or through the school associated with Boltanski and Thévenot. Bourdieu may cast a long shadow in the field, but Heinich's overview shows that there is much more to the French sociology of art than Bourdieu in its past, present and future.

Rather than reissue the call to take meaning more seriously, this special issue gets on with job. It turns the lonely median strip between sociology of the arts and cultural sociology into a better-travelled thoroughfare. Or to use different imagery, it creates more overlap between circles in the proverbial Venn diagram so that cultural approaches and sociological studies of the arts are no longer separate domains. These articles point towards some of the theoretical issues, methodological possibilities, and substantive areas that a cultural approach to studying the arts can illuminate. If momentum continues to gather in this direction, a renewal in the discipline is sure to begin.

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