

## **Bourdieu the Heresiarch**

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**To understand the symbolic revolution Manet launched, it is necessary to break with traditional representations of art history. This requires an intellectual revolution in its own right. Thus behind Manet, there lurks another heresiarch: Bourdieu himself.**

Revised: Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet, une révolution symbolique* (Manet: A Symbolic Revolution), edited by Pascale Casanova, Patrick Champagne, Christophe Charle, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Rivière, Paris, Raisons d'Agir / Seuil, coll. "Cours et Travaux," 2013, 776 p., 32 €.

The transcription and publication of the lectures that Bourdieu gave at the Collège de France in 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 have been eagerly awaited. It was known that Bourdieu had devoted all his energies, at the same time that he was writing *The Rules of Art*, to examining the work and career of the painter Edouard Manet, whom he saw as a revolutionary and a catalyst in the emergence of an autonomous artistic field. The heresiarch Manet—a counterpart to Gustave Flaubert, the heresiarch of the literary field—obsessed Bourdieu, who, seeing himself as a heresiarch in the intellectual field, undertook, in studying Manet, his own self-analysis. With *Manet, une révolution symbolique*, Bourdieu at last develops, in fascinating ways, some of the ideas he presented in the famous article he wrote for *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, "L'institutionnalisation de l'anomie" ("The Institutionalization of Anomie," 1987), in which Bourdieu laid the groundwork for his thinking about the establishment and functioning of the artistic field in the mid-nineteenth century.

### ***Bis Repetita***

At 500 pages, the text, transcribed from eighteen lectures delivered over a two year period (in addition to including an unfinished manuscript of a book on Manet), is extraordinarily wide-ranging in scope. We meet Bourdieu the pedagogue, using language which rambles while always remaining structured, logical, and understandable, even for those who are unfamiliar with his sociology. Bourdieu must deal with an audience that is cultured, of course, but still diverse. The lecture format shapes the argument: it is full of repetitions, comparisons, and asides which, on the one hand, slow down the exposition of ideas but, on the other, prepares the mind of his audience. For Manet's symbolic revolution can only be understood if the audience adopts the sociologist's perspective and abandons traditional conceptions of art history. Bourdieu encounters a difficulty that he acknowledges upfront: how can one understand a symbolic revolution without experiencing the intellectual revolution that is required to make it understandable?

Experienced Bourdieu readers will not be disappointed, even if there is nothing in these lectures that cannot be found in his more polished study, *The Rules of Art*. Bourdieu

explains that art's (always relative) autonomy is an historical achievement which must be explained: it asserted itself at the same time as the artistic field, within which Manet occupied a prominent position. Manet created an entirely new role, completely breaking with the world of academic art and challenging the academy's "monopoly on the legitimate handling of artistic goods." In this way, anomie gradually became the rule. Manet attacked the prevailing common sense, in which cognitive and social structures are harmonized. He launched a symbolic revolution by changing our categories of perception.

The concept of "field" remains, of course, central to Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit. It refers to the relatively autonomous social worlds in which each individual is positioned—in other words, exists in relation to others. As a result of the competition in which people, in practice, engage, these positions change. Manet's power lay in his ability to turn the tables on existing values—precisely because, as Bourdieu insists, of the mastery he acquired through the world of the academy, which he ultimately used to undermine it. Manet the heretic was anything but naïve: "He broke through continuity, he broke by returning to the sources, he broke through an excess of tradition" (p. 354).

Needless to say, Manet's symbolic revolution was contingent on a number of conditions of possibility. Bourdieu mentions some of these in *The Rules of Art*. The most important was the rising number of high school graduates. Of these, some pursued artistic careers, without, however, managing to be admitted to the academy (which was closed off due to a *numerus clausus*). As a group they were, while not necessarily rebellious, quick to embrace Manet's aesthetic revolution and, more generally, to trigger a "crisis of belief." Bourdieu mentions, among other factors, the invention of paint tubes (which encouraged painters to leave their studios and experience nature first hand), the state's gradual retreat from the artistic realm (notably from the organization of the salons), rising bourgeois demand (which encouraged portraits and genre scenes rather than historical painting), the growth of private exhibits, and so on. All these "favorable conditions," which Bourdieu, due to time constraints, discusses rather hurriedly, laid the groundwork for the revolution. What remains to be explained is Manet's own role, his position within the field, and the principles which guided his actions. Rather than replaying Manet's biography, as most art historians are content to do, Bourdieu describes his habitus. For Manet, like all us, is a "socialized biological being, endowed with permanent, socially constituted dispositions." Born into the enlightened bourgeoisie, endowed with considerable social, economic, and cultural capital, Manet, who was politically a republican, was able to converse on an equal footing with his master Thomas Couture, while at the same time presenting himself as a subversive and a rebel. Though he had close ties to bohemia and the café scene, he nevertheless kept his distance from them and continued to aspire for official recognition. In short, Manet's "divided" habitus—"against everyone and with everyone" (p. 485)—allowed him to "hold together what no one else could have held together" (p. 462).

In themselves, the Manet lectures are fully consistent with Bourdieu's earlier work. Indeed, the whole point of this exercise, for Bourdieu, is to apply his conceptual apparatus to the case of Manet, which belongs to his larger project of using studies of the artistic field to develop a science of cultural production.

## **The Dispositionist Approach**

Bourdieu repeatedly emphasizes his “dispositionist” approach, which is also mentioned in the subtitle of the 1999-2000 lectures. This is undoubtedly one of the most cutting ways in which Bourdieu challenges the scholastic world of art history. The author of *Outline of a Theory of Practice, Sens pratique* (Practical Sense), and *Practical Reasons* cares little about the creator’s intention: Manet, like any social agent, possessed a practical mastery of his art; not all of his actions were thought out, premeditated, objectivized, and rationalized. The revolution he launched partially eluded him. His dispositions, which he has “inculcated consciously and unconsciously” (p. 82), got the better of him. Caught up in the logic of his own action, Manet confronted practical problems to which he offered practical answers. Simply by being a socialized agent, endowed with a habitus, he created particular aesthetic problems and offered unique solutions. In this way, his painting could be “more meaningful than Manet realized” (p. 81). Yet Bourdieu is nonetheless careful to point out: “Producers act on their dispositions, which does not mean they do not understand what they are doing, but simply that they do not understand *everything* that they are doing” (p. 78).

Since he, too, is ensnared in the logic of his own thinking, Bourdieu finds himself engaged in an astonishing enterprise, one that seems as (nearly) impossible as it is transgressive. In the darkness of the amphitheater and under the screen onto which *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* is projected, the sociologist attempts, through words and gestures (which the transcription can render only imperfectly), to “restore the act of painting”: “I will take the point of view of Manet as he was painting *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. I will stop interpreting Manet’s oeuvre and undertake a kind of imaginary reconstruction of it, based on the theory of the dispositionist practice. I will try to reconstruct the act of painting, rather than contenting myself with the standpoint of a hermeneutic *lector*” (p. 117). Bourdieu “jumps into the water” (using a phrase that he will subsequently analyze) and sets out to explain the very concrete problems (subject, composition, *mise en forme*) to which Manet offer tentative answers. “He improvised his work and he could have done it somewhat differently,” Bourdieu observes, apologizing for his audacity in “taking Manet’s point of view.”

This is undoubtedly one of the most striking passages in the lectures. Clearly, Bourdieu has put his finger, as it were, on the painter’s uniqueness: he knew how to make the most of the knowledge he had acquired yet without ever knowing “completely what he would do” (p. 121). Yet Bourdieu can only approach the “act of painting” very imperfectly, as it is by its very nature irreducible to language. “One must,” he notes, “speak the language of painters ...” (p. 119). Some will smile in reading this passage, seeing it—mistakenly—as a sign of Bourdieu’s naiveté or pretention. This theory of practice, “the principle of which lies not in conscious intentions or premeditations, but in dispositions” (p. 76), will certainly not appeal to art historians, who have armed themselves against sociology in general, Bourdieu in particular, and any attempt to found a science of artwork.

### **Against the Grain**

When discussing the field of art history, Bourdieu does not pull his punches. In his view, this discipline, like many others, belongs to a scholastic world, whose members deliberately embrace a theoretical attitude (Bourdieu likes to remind us that “*theorein* means ‘to look from the outside’ without being involved” [p. 100]). Fussy erudition, which often serves as a substitute for serious thought, and the quest for the sources of artists’ inspiration are the field’s be all and end all. Art historians, he writes, “are teachers who ask artists teachers’ questions. They ask: ‘who is the painter quoting?’ They seek references which they

can put in their footnotes; they wonder about artists' *intentions*, how they go about it, and so on. They seek sources and references" (p. 273). He also calls attention to another danger: the obsession with interpretation, justified by Panofsky's iconological method. "Like all disciplines, art history has its own teratology. But this field is particularly vulnerable insofar as works of art, because they are equivocal, plurivocal, and polysemic, can have anything pinned onto them. The game of 'this reminds me of' is virtually limitless, particularly in a world in which scientific criteria and oversight are often discredited from the outset" (p. 46). We should add that in the eyes of the vast majority of historians, art is something sacred—Bourdieu goes so far as to call it a "site of obscurantism" (p. 152)—which means that the sociological approach—which is often accused of being reductive and disillusioned—is met with defiance.

Bourdieu does not make things any easier for himself by attacking several leading authorities in the field of art history, including T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, the author, in 1996, of *Manet's Modernism*, which he criticizes for its "iconological delirium" and its obsession with finding "references to everything ... as if they painter pulled out a box of reproductions, then started painting" (p. 297). The art historian Jacques Thuillier (1928-2011), who was Bourdieu's "friend," gets his fair share of criticism, too, although it is somewhat more restrained. According to Bourdieu, his eminent colleague at the Collège de France commits a "basic error" when comparing the training of academic painters and the preparatory classes which prepared students to be admitted into France's *grandes écoles*: failing to draw the logical conclusions of this comparison, Thuillier uses it to rehabilitate "*art pompier*" (a derogatory term for academic art), whereas for Bourdieu, this analogy is proof of this art's profoundly scholastic character. In short, Thuillier, who was himself a product of these preparatory classes, has failed to analyze his own relationship to the object he is studying (or, to put it differently, he does not subject himself to the "imperative of reflexivity" [p. 166]). Bourdieu also takes a swipe at the Musée d'Orsay, which he views as an ambiguous institution, which promotes a partial historicization of its artwork yet rehabilitates academic art. The fact remains that these jabs will very likely turn art historians against this book, which brazenly rubs them the wrong way.

But art historians' resistance to Bourdieu's sociology of art has deeper and perhaps insurmountable causes. Wary of this reputedly reductive discipline, art historians refuse to see works of art as "total social fact[s]" that are "traversed by structures with connections to the ... surrounding world" (p. 140). The very notion that "there exist trans-individual aesthetic effects which can be analyzed and explained" (p. 50) goes against the grain of a discipline which founds its legitimacy and autonomy on the *distinctiveness* of its object. For Bourdieu, "the purpose of art history, legal history, and history *tout court* is to identify these categories [that is, frameworks of appreciation] and to bring them to light" (p. 78). History, for Bourdieu, must free itself from linear narratives, inspired interpretation, and the quest for sources (which often makes art history seem like a long stylistic genealogy). His goal, rather, is to define invariable factors and rules and to tease out structures. Consequently, his works are full of concepts and explanatory principles which take thinking to a higher level of generality (in other words, validity). Bourdieu writes: "One can speak of a work while not only speaking of the work. Ultimately, one way to understand what I have done is to say that to speak of a work, one must speak of things that have nothing to do with the work itself."

## Aporias

If Bourdieu chose to devote these lectures to Manet, it is because he believed Manet had launched a symbolic revolution. His role, in the history of art, is unique, without parallel, and “unprecedented” (p. 450). The challenge is to connect this singularity to his predecessors and contemporaries who made this revolution possible. “This relationship is not at all simple and the symbolic revolution which Manet led would have remained an isolated episode and an eccentric undertaking if, facilitated by an objective crisis in the academic system which I have described at length, had this symbolic revolution not received, from within the artistic world itself, the complicity and support of artists, critics, and especially writers, who were themselves in the process of launching a similar reversal in their own field” (p. 450). Bourdieu is obviously not so naive as to believe that Manet led his revolution singlehandedly. The concept of field (which is indebted to historical analysis) makes it possible to restore the richness of a phenomenon which Manet, through his habitus, catalyzed.

Yet the actual story of this revolution is, inevitably, rather vague: eighteen lectures provides too little space to tell more detailed and nuanced story, whose origins can always be pushed back further and further in time (thus relativizing it). “It is very difficult to say where and when things started,” Bourdieu explains, “because it is sort of everywhere at once ... A series of chain reactions start making institutions crack” (p. 244). Thus, as he says elsewhere, “there is no absolute beginning in history, especially in the history of art, science, and literature” (p. 353). In this way, Manet was neither first (he appears in a world in which academic norms had been weakened for some time), nor unique. Yet his approach betrays a “methodical and radical determination” (p. 450) which justifies the two years of Collège de France lectures devoted to him. Thus even as he maintains that it is possible to assign an origin to a phenomenon which unfolds over time, Bourdieu sees Manet as *the* revolutionary par excellence—at the risk of bringing back, despite himself, an idea of the great man (or even the genius) which his sociology rejects on the grounds that “everything is social.” Though Bourdieu objects to the alternative between “break” and “continuity,” there is something disturbing about a presentation which gives greater weight to the confrontation between Manet the heresiarch and the academic world.

Furthermore, what exactly was Manet’s role in the autonomization of the artistic field? In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu acknowledges the essential role that Flaubert (as well as a few others) played in the literary field. Clearly convinced that Manet is Flaubert’s counterpart in the visual register, Bourdieu would seem to assign Manet extensive responsibility. Thus he seems to be both the creator of *and* a revolutionary within the artistic field: “This is what we mean by a symbolic revolutionary: someone who is completely controlled by the system, yet manages to take control of it by turning his mastery of the system against the system ... In advanced states of autonomous worlds or fields, this is the only form of revolution” (p. 377). This would seem to mean that Manet helped to autonomize a field that already found itself in an “advanced state” of autonomy, while also revolutionizing it.

Without calling Manet’s merit into question, Bourdieu might have benefited from expanding the scope of his inquiry by considering other artists who contributed to this symbolic revolution, such as Edgar Degas, for example, whose position in the artistic field was very similar to Flaubert’s in the literary field. Broadening the study in this way would, most likely, nuance his general thesis without calling it into question. But by focusing on Manet (Flaubert’s counterpart), Bourdieu is taking shots at Jean-Paul Sartre (the author of *The*

*Family Idiot*), as well as at Michel Foucault (who had promised the Editions de Minuit a book on Manet...).

In the same spirit, Bourdieu's comments on what he calls the "simili-revolution," that of the imitators and exploiters (like Bastien-Lepage), lack the neutrality one would expect of a sociologist. While it is true that these artists were not as bold as the pure revolutionaries (and that they might seem more self-interested), they nevertheless played an essential role: they transformed the sub-field of dominant artists (to speak like a sociologist) from within. These individuals, who were conquered—or contaminated—by the revolution, softened its effects, of course, but they also helped to spread it. Despite themselves, they became the revolution's Trojan horses. Bourdieu notes: "As soon as the revolution is underway, there is room for revolutionary imposture, for travesties of the revolution" (p. 24). A more preferable formulation of this critical point might be: there is room for adjustments and compromises, which are tangible evidence of the fact that the revolution has occurred and is gaining ground. In short, to persuade his audience, including art historians, Bourdieu might have included a little more history and a bit more nuance.

There is a final point, which Bourdieu mentions in passing, but which deserves further study. He observes: "The institution with a monopoly on producing the producers [of art] has, at least negatively, exerted a decisive influence on the evolution of art in France." Just as Marcel Gauchet has described Christianity as the religion for leaving religion, one might ask if the academy did not implicitly contain the seed of its own disappearance, consistent with a quasi-mechanical principle of action and reaction (and thus with no rehabilitating purpose).

Yet these false notes (which, strategically, may be useful to convert the most reticent) do not in any way blemish the entire score. By the end of his eighteen lectures, Bourdieu has offered us not only an (unfinished) symphony, but a full-fledged research agenda (art history rewritten from the standpoint of genetic structuralism). There is nothing unusual about the fact that Bourdieu proved unable to undertake such a superhuman task. Those who oppose the sociology of art on principle should consider the words of no less an authority than Picasso himself, who confided to Brassai his dream that "[s]omeday there will be undoubtedly a ... science of man ... which will seek to learn more about man in general through the study of the creative man." He added: "I often think about such a science, and I want to leave to posterity a documentation that will be as complete as possible." The name of this science? Sociology.

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