Evaluating Culture: Sociology, Aesthetics and Policy

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Abstract

This article contends that a sociologically-informed approach to aesthetic value can be usefully connected to debates regarding cultural policy. Such an approach can encourage reflexivity on the part of policy makers and cultural arbiters, making them sensitive to their privileged position in social space and aware of the differential levels of access to culture experienced by the public they serve. Furthermore, it can inform research into the process of evaluation that takes place at an individual and collective level. The article advocates research into the dynamics of the evaluative moment, which involves paying close attention to the interplay between the individual or group or community and the cultural object. The ways in which different social groups interact with and evaluate cultural objects will in part be determined by their social origin and levels of cultural competence. However, these contextual factors do not provide the whole picture. To zoom in on the dynamics of the evaluative moment means also to keep the cultural object in sight, to be aware of the properties of cultural objects as well as of the sensibilities and dispositions that enable their appreciation.

Keywords: *Aesthetic Value, Sociology, Cultural Policy, Evaluation, Cultural Object, Dynamics of the Evaluative Moment*

Introduction

1.1 Use of the sociological imagination, according to C. Wright Mills (1959), enables one to make connections, not just between matters of biography and wider socio-historical structures but between topics that are often isolated from one another (1959: 201). This article makes this kind of connection between sociological debates concerning aesthetic value and cultural policy. A sociologically-informed discussion of aesthetic value can be productively used to counter the dominant instrumental view of cultural policy and can make two key contributions to policy debates. First, it can provide a model for reflexivity on the part of policy makers and cultural arbiters, even as they are governed by more pressing external pressures. Second, it can inform research that examines the ways in which the public they serve evaluates culture. So as to understand the process of evaluation, and to connect it to policy debates, this article draws attention to the possibilities of zooming in at the micro-level on *the dynamics of the evaluative moment*, which involves paying close attention to the dynamic interplay between the individual or group or community and the cultural object. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984[1979]) has demonstrated, this interplay is not free, but is framed and conditioned in great part by class background. This means that the ability to adopt a specifically aesthetic point of view in regard to cultural objects, whether works of art or everyday items, will depend on the extent to which individuals have acquired certain cultural competences in the course of their formal education or as a consequence of social origin. An emphasis on context and conditioning, therefore, is important, but it does not provide the whole picture. To zoom in on the dynamics of the evaluative moment means also to keep the cultural object in sight. It means, therefore, to be aware of the properties of cultural objects as well as the sensibilities and dispositions that enable their appreciation (Hennion 2007).

Sociology, aesthetics and the evaluative impasse

2.1 As John Fekete (1988: i) suggests, '[q]uestions of value matter ... we live, breathe, and excrete values. No aspect of human life is unrelated to values, valuations, and validations'. However, in the twenty-first century, perhaps more so than at any time before, trying to justify the grounds for our

judgement is by no means straightforward. This is because taste hierarchies have lost their veneer of inevitability. Just as anti-essentialist arguments have revealed the 'naturalness' of constructs such as gender, race and sexuality to be historical and contingent, sociologists (among others) have performed a 'discrowning' of official hierarchies in the arts thus revealing them to be arbitrary (Bennett 2005). For example, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued that objects which are considered to represent the highest achievements of culture (sometimes referred to as 'high culture') are merely those that have been given the stamp of approval by the powerful. It is therefore more accurate to say that they represent *legitimate* rather than high culture. Bourdieu has also provided the most influential critique of the Kantian notion of aesthetic universalism. In his *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 2005[1790]), Immanuel Kant put forward the argument that aesthetic judgments are formulated by means of disinterested reflection, meaning that the works of art are contemplated for their own sake rather than because they serve some ulterior purpose. Kant proceeded to argue that whereas corporeal tastes are subjective, it is possible for aesthetic judgements regarding the beautiful to lay claim to universality. Bourdieu (2000[1997]: 73) considers this Kantian notion of aesthetic universalism, the idea that there is a transcendental sensibility open to everyone, to be a scholastic fallacy. Disinterested or pure aesthetic judgement is based on two conditions: the first is the emergence of a field of cultural production that has, over a long period, established its autonomy, meaning that it obeys its own laws and is thus – in its most autonomous regions – freed from economic and political constraints. The second condition is the development of an aesthetic disposition. This is a way of viewing the world that is learned and is not something transcendent (as Kant would have it). It is a disposition that is the product of one's education and family upbringing. As a child from a privileged family grows up, distanced from economic necessity for a prolonged period of life, s/he insensibly 'develops the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension [such as works of art]... but everything in the world' (Bourdieu 1984: 3).

2.2 Bourdieu's critique is illuminating but it also poses a problem. How do we evaluate culture if our evaluations are merely expressions of our habitus and if prized cultural objects are only prized because they have been consecrated by prestigious societal groups? In short, we are left at an evaluative impasse. There are, of course, two easy ways out of this impasse. The first is cultural relativism, which, comparable to moral relativism, would mean to refrain from making value-judgements; to declare it impossible to say whether something is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, interesting or banal. There have been some currents within postmodernist writing that have been expressive of this; which have, as Jeffrey Weeks (1993: 192) observes, offered a celebration of valuelessness in the romantic garb of consumerist amorality and nihilism. However, as Austin Harrington (2008: 108) makes clear, not only is cultural relativism unwelcome but it is not actually possible in practice:

If it were not possible to discriminate differences of aesthetic value in individual cultural objects, there would be no rational basis for aesthetic judgement. If no individual cultural object could be judged as being higher or lower in aesthetic value than another, there would be no basis for use of positive predicates in ordinary language such as "elegant", "brilliant", "inspiring", in distinction to the negative predicates such as "mediocre", "dull", "average". It would follow from this that any person could produce any object which no other person could criticise, or even praise.

2.3 A second way out of the evaluative impasse is to leave matters of judgment to the market. This would mean that cultural objects are ranked in terms of what they are worth, or in terms of how many units they sell. In short, this means that cultural objects are judged by entirely quantitative means, in accordance with the logic of the money economy. Georg Simmel (1997[1896]: 251) argued over 100 years ago that as a result of its ubiquity in our everyday transactions we have come to mistakenly view money as an end in itself rather than a means. This is because money is perceived as all that is necessary 'like the magic key in a fairy tale, in order to attain all the joys of life' (Simmel 1997: 252). However, to reduce matters cultural to this logic means, as Simmel (1997: 250-1) argued, 'getting stuck in the labyrinth of means and thereby forgetting the ultimate goal'. As a consequence we 'speed past the specific value of things, which cannot be expressed in terms of money', and, to put it more crudely, we valorise cultural objects simply because they are worth a lot of money and fail to observe the qualities of things that command little attention in the marketplace. For example, we might consider the music created by a busker to be valueless, precisely because it has been played out in the theatre of the penniless: the street, and at best, we might view the musician as *an unrealised product*, marketable or otherwise. There is, of course, a further option, which is to ignore matters of aesthetic value, and I have documented elsewhere a number of reasons why scholars working in sociology and related disciplines have done so (Stewart 2012). Primary among these reasons is the fear of elitism. Sociology has excelled in bringing culture down to earth and explaining the social conditions that enable a particular aesthetic to emerge (Inglis 2005). In doing so, it has stripped taste hierarchies of their sense of inevitability. There is, as consequence, a concern that by engaging anew with aesthetic value, they will contribute to the construction of new hierarchies. Aesthetics has long been considered something outside the domain of sociology or social theory, and as Eduardo de la Fuente (2008: 344) comments, it is something that has been treated with suspicion, something that is irrational and/or entirely individualistic. Many sociologists 'have sought to store questions of value in a strategic "black box" and 'the challenge remains to address these questions' (Harrington 2004: 39).

2.4 So, if there are no universal, timeless aesthetic values, and if we consider cultural relativism and the logic of the market to be unappealing, where do we turn for evaluative criteria? Let us look at some alternative evaluative approaches from scholars working in sociology and related disciplines that have emerged in recent years. Harrington (2004) makes the important point that with the legitimacy of taste hierarchies undermined, there need be no *a priori* discrimination in favour of fine art over other cultural forms. Indeed, scholars working in cultural studies have sought to find ways of evaluating popular cultural forms such as television dramas (Geraghty 2003) and popular music (Frith 1996). Harrington therefore proposes that in evaluating culture we give parity of esteem to various categories of cultural production.

This means, for example, that there is no need to form a basis of comparison between a pop song and a piano sonata, between a video game and a poem, between a type of cuisine and a style of dancing. To assign a 'high' or 'low' category is not defensible. What is important, however, is that it is possible to compare individual cultural objects within these categories of cultural production. This approach does, however, throw up several problems, not least because categories of cultural production are by no means hermetically sealed or separated by dividing walls, and there is much crossover between them. This notwithstanding, with imagination, the construction of comparative categories is possible.

2.5 Harrington also puts forward the argument that social theory has a role in mediating between value distanciation and value affirmation. The former is based on a qualified adherence to Max Weber's notion of value-freedom in the social sciences. For Weber (2011[1917]: 11), this meant that 'the investigator and teacher should keep unconditionally separate the establishment of empirical facts ... and *his* own practical evaluations'. Value affirmative approaches are rooted in liberal-humanistic scholarship which tends to privilege formal aesthetic evaluation at the expense of social, political and economic considerations (Harrington 2004: 40). An example of a value-neutral approach can be found in institutional theories of art (Dickie 1974). From this perspective, that which we consider to be an object of 'art' is distinguishable from other objects not because of some special aura it might have but because it has been given status by an institution with a certain degree of cultural authority. Value-neutral approaches tend to strip art and the artistic process of its mystery, and so, for example, Howard Becker (1982: xi) invites us to '[t]hink of all the activities that must be carried out for any work of art to appear as it finally does'. Becker draws attention to the social organizational aspect of art rather than to its aesthetics, and his approach to aesthetic value involves a shift in focus away from the properties of a cultural object towards an examination of the ways in which consensus regarding the value of cultural objects is created by participants in the art world. Similarly, in Bourdieu's (1987, 1993[1983], 1996[1992]) model of the field of cultural production, the value and meaning of an artwork is generated out of the struggle in the field which involves all participants, each with varying degrees of power at their disposal to confer legitimacy. This struggle involves

all who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the artworld is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art (Bourdieu 1987: 205).

2.6 So, value is not simply created out of an individual's interaction with a particular cultural object but is created out of structural relations, out of struggle, and even if all participants in the cultural field – from agents to costume directors to stage managers to curators to critics to artists – have some stake in the struggle, those with the most resources at their disposal are in a better position to confer legitimacy on a cultural object. Bourdieu's approach enables us to view the genesis of the cultural field across time *and* to historicise our ways of thinking about matters of value. Exactly what is valued and by whom it is valued changes over time, and as the cultural field has, over time, gained autonomy from forms of patronage, it has developed its own institutions and each period in the history of the cultural field corresponds to a particular aesthetic disposition, a way of understanding and appreciating culture (Bourdieu 1987).

2.7 Value-neutral approaches enable us to see how the value of culture is socially produced. However, in examining the social production of value, such approaches have a tendency to lose sight of the cultural object itself and thus reduce matters of value to power struggles which have as their stake the legitimacy of one cultural object over another, one artistic style over another, one artist over another. In Becker's (1982) approach, for example, we can learn much about the context from which certain artistic forms emerge, but very little about the aesthetic content of specific cultural objects or the aesthetic norms that have informed their creation (Harrington 2004: 37). Along similar lines, Antoine Hennion (2001, 2007) has criticised Bourdieu's approach, arguing that it has over-sociologized our interactions with cultural objects. Hennion argues that in Bourdieu's model, cultural objects are little more than tokens in a symbolic game of power struggles. In contrast, Hennion argues that cultural objects are not merely symbols nor are they inert. Rather, they 'give themselves up, they shy away, they impose themselves' (2007: 97), and in his empirical work on taste he is interested in studying the ways in which 'amateurs' (for example, music lovers) make themselves sensitive to cultural objects (pieces of music) by means of various practices and techniques.

Normative approaches and the aesthetics of uncertainty

3.1 So, with our attention again focused on the cultural object, let us turn to normative approaches to aesthetic value. Such approaches, which are rooted in humanistic scholarship, draw inspiration from antiquity and the values of the European Enlightenment. They have taken as the primary task of criticism the formal evaluation of cultural objects, seeking to identify 'canons' made up of works which have 'stood the test of time', works which speak for universal values of society and can thus play a key role in the that which Matthew Arnold (1994[1869]: 5) termed 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'. As Bauman (2011: 6) observes, 'culture' in this sense, was part of the Enlightenment project, 'an agent for change ... a navigation tool to steer social evolution towards a universal human condition'. The cultural objects evaluated and selected for literary and artistic canons tended to have been created by white, European men, and therefore carried 'the connotation of a sacred sequence, based on a succession of "founding fathers" and have thus been exclusionary and patriarchal (Harrington 2004: 40). Furthermore, those creating the canons have not paid attention to the social, economic and political conditions from which the cultural objects (and their evaluation of the cultural object) have emerged.

3.2 With the above criticisms in mind, it is not possible to return wholeheartedly to normative approaches. However, there are aspects of such approaches that can be rescued, and as Janet Wolff (2008) demonstrates, these can be useful in enabling us to consider value in the context of communities. Wolff

(2008) advocates an 'aesthetics of uncertainty', taking cue from Zygmunt Bauman's (2003: 93) assertion that since the demise of the universals associated with the Enlightenment, uncertainty is the basis for morality. With no recourse to absolute values it is nevertheless possible to reach consensus regarding questions of value. Along similar lines, Weeks (1993: 196) writes that the project of human solidarity can no longer depend on *a priori* arguments, but it *can* seek to create bonds 'across the chasm of difference'. Wolff translates these ideas across to the field of aesthetics, and argues that it is only on the grounds of uncertainty that we can reconsider questions of aesthetic value. This is, then, an 'aesthetics of uncertainty', one which avoids discredited universalisms *and* refuses to adhere to the 'anything goes' logic of cultural relativism. It is a reflexive approach, one is committed to 'laying bare the basis – social, cultural, ideological – of any judgement, including one's own' (2008: 37). This means an acknowledgement that judgment is exercised within a particular social and cultural context at a particular time and place. Wolff's model is one that seeks to locate value in the context of communities, playing close attention to the fact that where aesthetic hierarchies are negotiated and produced, there will be differences in access and the distribution of power. This reflexivity involves a clear articulation of the interests involved in such debates. For example, Wolff's approach to art history is informed by feminist concerns, and these concerns are difficult to separate from her roles as scholar and art curator. According to Wolff, it is important to 'make transparent the grounds for judgment' (2008: 50).

3.3 A reflexive approach enables us to understand why it is that Wolff was excited to curate an exhibition of the 1920s artist and saloniere Kathleen McEnery. The 'discovery' of McEnery's realist paintings was in part revelatory because of Wolff's interest in a feminist project that sought to rescue work that had been marginalized by the dominant patriarchal modernist aesthetic of its time. However, just as a sociological approach enabled her to understand the reception of the artwork, a rather fundamental question arose in Wolff's mind that needed to be answered: is McEnery's work any good? Her conclusions were that yes, McEnery's work is good. But in reaching this conclusion and evaluating the paintings, Wolff found herself deploying evaluative criteria such as form, composition, line and innovation borrowed from 'older' disciplines associated with more normative approaches to aesthetics and art history. Again, a degree of reflexivity enables us to see that these criteria have their own social and political histories, and there is no such thing as universal aesthetics that 'transcend the contingencies of time and place or the interests and investments of diverse social groups' (2008: 37). However, these criteria did serve to provide the means of cross-cultural or intercommunity dialogue regarding the value of the cultural objects in question. This renewed attention to formal criteria is 'post-critical' in as much as it is aware that objectivity in Western aesthetics and art history is a myth (2008: 19). Wolff's argument is clearly contentious, especially in its assertion that it is possible to make transparent the grounds for judgment. This claim runs contrary to sociological thinking, though reflexivity might help us get some way towards such 'transparency'. Her advocacy of a community-derived approach to the production and negotiation of aesthetic value is both intriguing and appealing, but is by no means straightforward. Would these communities merely serve to replicate existing taste hierarchies given that they are microcosms of society, mirroring its power inequalities? Is it not the case that an individual's ability to confer legitimacy in evaluative pronouncements is in great part dependent on the extent to which they possess adequate levels of economic, cultural and social capital? Those with the most say in most communities tend to be those with the biggest balance sheet of such capital. With this in mind, attention to evaluation formed within a community context needs to be carefully thought through. However, these critical comments notwithstanding, Wolff's community model could prove to be very useful for cultural policy makers and cultural arbiters, both in terms of them thinking of themselves as a community (albeit an elite community) and in terms of their formulating research into the aesthetic preferences of the various communities that make up the general public they serve.

Cultural policy trends

4.1 Of what use are the above-mentioned sociologically-informed discussions of aesthetic value to cultural policy? Such discussions can provide a counter-point to the dominant tendency towards 'enterprise culture' which stresses the instrumental value of culture and increasingly leaves matters of judgment to markets. This latter approach is adopted by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), one of the most prominent 'think tanks' promulgating neo-liberal philosophy in the UK, which promotes something of an 'ideal-type' (to use Max Weber's (1968[1913]) terminology) of pro-free market argument. It has long called for the abolition of state funding of the arts and has come to wield considerable influence on UK Government policy. In many ways, the IEA offers a neat solution to the problem that has faced us since what Craig Owens (cited in Belfiore 2002: 94) terms the 'crisis of cultural authority' took hold and postmodern thinking considered taste hierarchies to be arbitrary. The IEA's position represents a non-critical solution to the postmodern problem of cultural relativism: if the experts have lost their credibility and can no longer persuade us that one cultural form is more worthy than another, it is best to leave the decision of what is 'worthy' to the market. There is no need for discussion of value. The current IEA Director General Mark Littlewood has formulated a catchphrase which sums up the think tank's position on cultural funding: 'Popular arts don't need subsidies. Unpopular arts don't deserve subsidies' (Institute of Economic Affairs 2011). There is a kind of moral code in this statement. Those who are able to create something that appeals to the many will not need to go begging to cultural organizations for help. They will be justly remunerated for their efforts by all of those who choose to consume their product. In contrast, the IEA infers that financial flows heading from the state in the direction of 'unpopular arts' are entirely unjustified. According to the IEA, state-funded cultural bureaucracies impose their elite tastes on tax-payers who are forced to contribute financially to unpopular, esoteric cultural forms that they will not appreciate. This forced contribution is in effect 'a transfer of money from the poor to the rich' because arts-going is primarily a pastime of the affluent, and yet it is funded by the ordinary working person (Blundell 2009). The IEA goes so far as to argue that members of 'quangos' have contempt for the tastes of the wider public; *they* enjoy the privilege of being able to decide what is worthy of success, and alongside wealthy arts-goers, use their privileged position in society to defend state subsidies (Blundell 2009; Sawers 1993). Underpinning the IEA's call for a dismantling of state support for the arts is a

conviction that the free-market is the best arbiter of quality and will provide the public with the cultural objects that they prefer (Institute of Economic Affairs 2011).

4.2 The argument that the market will provide is, at best, highly speculative. Theodor Adorno's (1991[1960]) reflections on the fractious relationship between culture and administration provide a useful counterpoint to the IEA's position, highlighting its limitations. According to Adorno (1991: 112), culture suffers damage when overseen by administration; it is presided over by those whose specialism lies in the formally rational, technical matters that enable an organization to flourish (Weber 1968). There is an antinomy between this mode of operating and the creative purposefulness of culture (1968: 112). This notwithstanding, the culture-administration relationship has its virtues: when taken under the wing of administration, cultural creators have the opportunity to produce art that would not otherwise see the light of day. Furthermore, cultural creators are able to make a living. The annulment of the relationship – as suggested by the likes of the IEA – is therefore ill-advised:

The appeal to the creators of culture to withdraw from the process of administration and keep distance from it has a hollow ring. Not only would this deprive them of the possibility of earning a living, but also of every effect, every contact between work of art and society, something which the greatest integrity cannot do without, if it is not to perish (Adorno 1991: 119).

4.3 As it stands, the IEA hasn't yet completely got its way in the UK, and in other countries that have longstanding traditions of supporting their cultural sectors, funding has continued, albeit reduced in some instances. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, a number of complex and often contradictory trends have emerged in relation to cultural funding across Europe. In some instances, cultural funding has actually increased. For example, in France, in 2010 President Sarkozy was keen to position himself as a defender of the arts and his Minister for Culture and Communications Frédéric Mitterand argued that France differentiated itself from other countries in Europe which were cutting back on their budgets. The French budget for the arts increased by 2.7% in 2010 (Inkei 2011: 8) though analysts have argued that while France spends on large-scale projects such as the Philharmonie de Paris concert hall, tax cuts and funding cuts to regional administrations have meant that many smaller arts organizations face collapse. In other parts of Europe, increases in funding have occurred: for example the German Cultural Policy Association found that of sixty German cities canvassed, 57% reported increases in their cultural budgets (Inkei 2011: 8). Increases have been even more emphatic in Slovenia in great part as a result of European Capital of Culture nominations. For example, the city of Maribor's cultural budget rose from 3.5 to 9.7 million Euros between 2008 and 2010, during times of austerity across Europe (Inkei 2011: 6). On the other hand, there have been substantial reductions in funding in countries in crisis such as Italy, which is increasingly turning to market-solutions to cultural funding. In Italy, the culture budget has been cut by almost 50% over a three year period, from \$603 million to \$340 million, including a 37% reduction in performing arts subsidies. Italy's Culture Ministry (like its UK counterpart) is turning to philanthropists with the hope of making up some of the shortfall (Nadeau 2011). In the UK, as a consequence of the Government's spending review in 2010, the total budget for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was reduced by 24 per cent to £2 billion. There will be a 30 per cent reduction in the funding of Arts Council England from £449 million to £349 million per year by 2015, and hundreds of arts organizations have lost their funding altogether in the latest round of bids (Arts Council England 2012). The contradictory nature of these trends can be explained by the conflicting roles the twenty-first century state has to play (Harvey 2005). On the one hand, it is expected to take a back seat in regard to cultural matters. In many countries, neo-liberal political-economic theory and practice, which has been in the ascendancy since the 1980s, has sought to hollow out the state and reduce its social function to a minimum, limiting its role to protecting property rights and the rule of law, and facilitating free trade (Bourdieu 1998; Gray 2007; Harvey 2005). On the other hand, in order to be competitive on the global scene, the state continues to play an active role in creating conditions that are favourable for trade and for tourism (Harvey 2005; Urry 2002: 158). The state needs to devise various strategies that will foster the loyalty of its citizens and one such strategy is an appeal to sentiment rooted in nationalism (Harvey 2005: 85). We see, therefore, that alongside the slashing of cultural budgets in some areas, there continues to be lavish expenditure in others, especially on grand projects that serve to create and maintain a sense of cultural heritage such as in the case of the Philharmonie de Paris, or tell the story of a nation's urbanity on the global stage, as celebrated in the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics in London.

4.4 It is important to observe that even in countries where cultural funding has increased, there has been a tendency to ideologically orientate cultural policies so that they accord with wider social processes of commodification and a privatization agenda formulated in response to a perceived crisis in the welfare state model (Gray 2007; Harvey 2005). This tendency is highlighted again and again in cultural policy literature. For example, Victoria Alexander's (2007) analysis of cultural funding in the UK demonstrates that business jargon has now thoroughly permeated the world of cultural administration. She argues that from 1979 onwards, the direction in cultural funding changed as the new Thatcher-led government sought to dismantle the public sector and formulate policy that reflected a wider trend towards 'enterprise culture', embodying minimal state-intervention, the liberty of individuals and a belief in the efficiency of the free-market (Alexander 2007: 4). Along similar lines, Bourdieu (2003[2001]) has drawn attention to the 'intrusion of commercial logic at every stage of the production and circulation of cultural goods'; he argues that the most autonomous region of the cultural field is under threat as culture is increasingly 'subsumed under the term of "information" ... conceived as a mere commodity, and consequently treated as any other product and subjected to the law of profit' (2003: 68). With its critical edge blunted, cultural creation is increasingly subordinated to an aesthetic that is derived from the need for short-term profit and so the public is increasingly fed 'omnibus products' which are designed specifically to appeal to *everyone* and have no particularly distinguishing features. Clive Gray (2000) finds that a process of commodification increasingly dominates the relationship between the state and the arts, and cultural products are valued in terms of their exchange value rather than their use value. As a consequence, the

arts are not considered in terms of their use – 'providing pleasure for individuals ... or provoking thought ... but as commodities that can be judged by the same economic criteria as cars, clothes or any other consumer good' (2000: 6). Like Bourdieu, Gray sees aesthetic concerns marginalized by the logic of the marketplace, with, therefore, 'a veritable censorship by money' (Bourdieu 2003: 69) because cultural objects are judged in terms of their exchange value.

Instrumental value

5.1 Cultural policy has always, to a great extent, served instrumental ends, whether bolstering national prestige, serving as a tool of political power or as a means of enhancing status. As Bauman (2011: 96-7) observes, back in sixteenth century France, the monarchy's approach to culture was messianic and it 'signalled proselytizing intentions: enlightening, eye-opening, converting, refining, perfecting'. Above all it was designed to improve its people so as to make them fitter subjects. Reaching back even further, Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (2007: 140) point out that instrumentalism is 2,500 years old and Plato's *Republic* can be seen as a 'cogent and systematic theorization of instrumental cultural policy'. Belfiore and Bennett identify what they term a 'positive tradition' regarding the social impact of the arts, which puts forward a number of claims regarding the beneficial aspects of exposure to the arts. For example, in *Poetics*, Aristotle makes the case for the cathartic effect of seeing theatrical performance and experiencing pity and fear through the dramatic form, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Romantics had faith in the ennobling aspect of the arts. During the modern period, the arts were linked with wider processes of civilizing and educating the people of a nation (as well as colonial subjects in far-away lands) and thus served a moral function (2007: 144). Regarding more recent examples, Kees Vuyk (2000) makes the case that the post-Second World War boom in arts funding was motivated by governments' desire to push their Cold War ideological agenda, and soon after the Berlin Wall fell, cultural policy came under attack because it was no longer politically expedient. Gray (2007) argues that in recent years, the form and direction of instrumentality has changed so that the dominant forms of justification of state-spending on culture are now primarily economic and (secondarily) social. It has been argued that cultural policy can (for example) contribute to economic growth as well as to urban regeneration, community empowerment and the reduction of social exclusion, even if there is little evidence to support such claims (Belfiore 2002). According to Gray, culture ministers emphasize the instrumental benefits that derive from the cultural sector because the relatively weak structural position of their department means that they have to deploy attachment strategies so as to justify their funding. Attachment strategies involve culture departments asserting that they can help to fulfil goals set by other, more powerful government departments. As a consequence, they are expected 'to provide a host of solutions to problems that are originally economic, social, political or ideological' (Gray 2007: 207).

Connecting sociologically-informed discussions of aesthetic value to cultural policy

6.1 So, instrumental policies are influenced as much by exogenous structural pressures as by factors that arise within the sector, set, as they are, within a battleground constantly fought over by finance ministries and spending ministries. Crucially, this means that in cultural departments, discussions of aesthetic value in relation to what should be funded are subordinated to wider social, political and economic considerations. This does not mean, however, that the aesthetic dimension in decision making is not significant. Let us then consider how a sociologically informed approach to aesthetic value can inform decision-making processes in relation to cultural funding. First, it can inform a degree of reflexivity on the part of policy makers and those sitting on the boards of funding councils. To apply Bourdieu's (1986[1983]) terms, these cultural arbiters are likely to be familiar with *legitimate* culture and will have at their disposal – in comparison with the public they serve – a disproportionately large amount of the various forms of capital: social, economic and cultural. Alongside their privileged position in social space, they occupy a privileged position in a particular field: the cultural field, and by entering and succeeding in this particular field, they will have insensibly adapted to the 'rules of the game' and the ways of thinking and acting in relation to cultural phenomena. The process of adaptation to such rules takes place imperceptibly, as a result of years of schooling and training, both formal and informal, and the adjustment of the participant's habitus to the field 'means taking seriously (sometimes to the point of making them questions of life and death) stakes which, arising from the logic of the game itself, establish its "seriousness"' (Bourdieu 2000: 11). The evaluative judgments that they make will not be 'pure' or 'disinterested' but will correlate to the state of play in the cultural field, which has its own autonomy; such judgments will also depend on the cultivation of an aesthetic disposition, one which makes a formal analysis of cultural objects possible. Awareness of the socio-historical conditions of the judgments is thus enabled by a reflexivity that 'dispossesses the knowing subject of the privilege it normally grants itself' (Bourdieu 2000: 10). Of course, getting cultural professionals to use the sociological imagination and reflect on their own social positioning is never going to be easy, but nor, Bourdieu maintains, is getting academics, sociologists included, to do so! However, such reflexivity can enable policy makers to be aware of their own privileges as well as make them sensitive to the differential levels of access to culture experienced by the public they serve.

6.2 Perhaps more interestingly, sociological discussions of aesthetic value can encourage research regarding the evaluation of culture in the context of the communities. Attention to the micro-level of evaluative judgement can therefore help address the kind of problems highlighted by the IEA regarding what they perceive to be an elite-dominated cultural sector imposing its tastes on a disinterested or even bemused public. To examine evaluation in this way means to recognize the 'games' of which Bourdieu speaks, but it also means to *zoom in on the dynamics of the evaluative* moment. This does not mean returning to a search of universal or timeless values, but means considering cultural evaluation as a quotidian activity out of which values emerge which are shared, contested, disputed or celebrated. As we have discussed, such evaluation needs to be contextualized and historicized, connecting the personal, intimate experience with larger social realities, but we can also consider the precise moment in which evaluation takes place.

6.3 The first dynamic to explore is *the presence of other people and the influence they bear*. Evaluation, even of the most immediate kind, without recourse to prolonged reflection, is often guided by the opinions of others that are passed, for example, from critic to public, from father to son, from husband to wife, from friend to friend, from colleague to colleague, from stranger to stranger. The moment of evaluation might well be guided by the influence of others who have long since left this world as much as by those currently closest to us. Of course, we cannot consider the influence of others without considering power dynamics and the fact that our evaluations will be, at least in some way, affected by social currents that hold sway, or by the dynamics of the group in which we are situated. For Simmel (1950[1902]: 145), for example, the arrival of a third person on the scene will profoundly alter the social interaction between two people and the group formation would occur in ways that are not possible in a dyadic relationship. It might be the case that the third person mediates between the other two; it might be that s/he gains advantage by taking the side of one or the other in a quarrel or discussion between two parties; it might be that the third person actively creates conflict between two parties so as to gain a dominant position in the interaction (1950: 162). If we apply this to cultural evaluation, we can see that the number of other people with us at the precise moment of evaluation will have a significant bearing on the outcome. It might mean, on the one hand, that we are able to formulate some kind of co-authored inter-subjective judgement of a cultural object, or, on the other, that our evaluations diverge, that we take sides, that differences emerge out of the conflict of opinions, that we find ourselves in the minority or majority, in the weaker or the stronger party. To be part of a bigger crowd, one that is listening with rapt attention to a performance, might draw us closer to the cultural object, and the emotional intensity that can come with being part of this crowd is likely to make us respond in ways that we wouldn't if alone. Thinking about evaluation along these lines will enable us to consider 'the emergence and development of shared discourses of value in the context of community' (Wolff 2008: 23). However, communities or aggregations of people are made up of individuals with varying levels of socially valued cultural competence (Bourdieu 1984). Those with high levels of cultural and educational capital at their disposal are more likely than most other social groupings to have their evaluations legitimised. In addition to this, they are well-positioned to confer legitimacy on a cultural object. With this in mind, Stephanie Lawler's (2005: 442) notion of classed relationality can be fruitfully applied to matters of evaluation. According to Lawler, the aesthetic stance adopted by the middle classes is defined in relation to a negative reference point: working class taste, which is, in its least prestigious region, considered to be a no-go area, the constitutive limit of taste (Skeggs 2004: 172). Lawler (2005: 441-442) argues that 'in a sense, it matters little what working-class people actually do since their role is to act as a foil'. Prestigious social groups give themselves value in relation to a valueless other; in contrast to their taste, 'an assumed ignorance and immorality is read off from an aesthetic which is constituted as faulty' (Lawler 2005: 437). If Lawler is right, research attentive to a dynamic concerned with the presence of other people is likely to find struggles for distinction as much as instances of co-authorship.

6.4 A second dynamic we might consider is *the methods and practices deployed in order to engage with the cultural object*. Sociological discussions of aesthetic value have a tendency to be entirely context-driven and all too often, the cultural object is forgotten. A close scrutiny of the interaction between the evaluator and the cultural object is one way of contributing towards a new approach to aesthetic value that takes account of the materiality of objects. This means, for example, being attentive to the various ways in which evaluators prepare themselves ready for a cultural experience, seeking to maximise the intensity of that experience. Hennion's (2001, 2007) research on the sociology of taste is instructive in formulating this approach. He draws attention to taste as an activity that 'is a passivity actively sought, or an activity intentionally undergone, letting oneself be carried away, overflowing with the surprises that arise through contact with things' (Hennion 2007: 109). In Hennion's account of tasting we see that tasting involves sensitising oneself – by means of various techniques and devices – so as to be in a position to perceive the properties of a cultural object. He gives the example of the moment of attention that a dinner guest gives to his glass of wine: 'He takes his glass, he begins to drink. At this point, he stops an instant, takes two small sniffs, drinks again, makes a "moment" with his lips while replacing his glass' (Hennion 2007: 104). In this intense moment of tasting, the taster is attentive towards the object and the object reveals itself to the taster. Of course, if we drink the wine without thinking about it, the contact with the object will not have the same intensity and will be mechanical, routine. But if we train ourselves to be attentive to the object, the object will 'offer itself' to us, and what is set in motion is very much a dialogue between the taster and the object. This attention to the object can also be found in Ben Highmore's (2010) work on a social aesthetics that seeks to apprehend the qualitative uniqueness of cultural objects 'as agents of social life, rather than mediated reflections thereof' (2010: 161). With this in mind, a glass of wine is not merely a symbol in a wider social game. It has presence, and, of course, when we drink the wine it has a direct impact on the body. Hennion's and Highmore's approaches to taste are instructive because they do not lose sight of the cultural object in formulating a sociologically-informed approach to aesthetics. Crucially, I'd suggest, this attention to the moment of tasting can be extended out to matters of evaluation.

6.5 A further dynamic is *the level of our engagement with the cultural object*. Our engagement might be intense, as it is for the fan, the enthusiast, the obsessive; it might be passionate and focused, so that when we observe, we do not miss a line, a curve, a detail; so that when we listen, we carefully register each note, each intonation; so that when we feel, we feel the full force of the experience and perhaps the collective effervescence that arises from crowd of which we are a part if we are at a music concert, if we are at a sporting event. On the other hand, our engagement might be best characterized as detachment, so that, for example, as we walk around the gallery we glance up at the paintings much as we would at the adverts between television programmes. We notice them, but we do not bother to pay them much attention, for our focus is elsewhere: we might be enjoying a conversation that is concerned with a completely different matter. If we are attentive to the moment of evaluation, we see that it might be intense and passionate, detached and scholarly, or carried out in a semi-distracted state. We might vociferously make the case for a particular art-installation or we might, in passing, with very little

emotional register, find reasons to dismiss it.

6.6 Just as one should pay attention to the socio-historical context within which evaluative judgement takes place, it is important to consider *the impact of location on the moment of evaluation*. After all, the most beautiful music in the world might be considered abhorrent if encountered in a profoundly unsettling and intimidating location. For those not 'trained' to be familiar with what Bourdieu (1984: 273) terms the 'obligatory exaltation of the austere severity of the museum and the "meditation" it encourages', the museum might be a hostile, cold and unwelcoming place, and the impact of this imposing temple of the legitimate might detrimentally affect the evaluation of its contents for some. In contrast, individuals hailing from the upper echelons of the middle classes for whom 'extra-curricular' cultural practices and a certain freedom from economic necessity have been the norm, are likely to feel at ease when evaluating in art galleries or other legitimate cultural institutions. However, it is important to register that for cultural arbiters just as for the rest of us, the cultural object has its own presence and it can surprise us, in the most unlikely places, as we go about our everyday business performing mundane tasks. This is, some might say, the value of street-theatre or of community art events that shake us out of our complacency and encourage us to view the world differently, at least for the moment. It is also the case for events that surprise us with their sense of inclusiveness, whether on a small-scale, such as when a flash-dance erupts in our city centres, or on a grander scale, when we are faced with a spectacle on the global stage, such as the opening ceremony of an Olympic Games or a musical event that – for a moment at least – draws us in, allaying hierarchies and differences.

Concluding remarks

7.1 Wherever state funding still exists, deciding what gets funded in the culture and arts sector is in large part a political process, but these decisions will also have an aesthetic dimension, even if the aesthetic is subordinated to political, economic and bureaucratic considerations (Street 2000: 28). As long as debates regarding cultural policy are not settled entirely by economic or political processes, by 'free-markets' or by the abstract processes characterized by formal rationality, sociologists can contribute to debates regarding what people value and can illuminate processes of evaluation. A sociologically-informed approach to the problem of *evaluation* – at an individual and collective level, and within the context of communities – can be connected to debates regarding cultural policy, and in relation to the latter, can provide an alternative to discourses of instrumentalism which, in accordance with wider processes of neo-liberalism, reduce the worth of everything to its market value (Bourdieu 2003; Gray 2000). Researching the ways in which people evaluate and making a contribution to an understanding of the dynamics of the evaluation process is part of a wider project that seeks to draw attention to *other forms* of value, *other ways* of valuing.

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