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Picasso and pâté de foie gras: Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture  
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste by Pierre Bourdieu; Richard Nice  
Review by: Elizabeth Wilson  
*Diacritics*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Pecunia non olet (Summer, 1988), pp. 47-60  
Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/)  
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465298>  
Accessed: 28/04/2013 20:09

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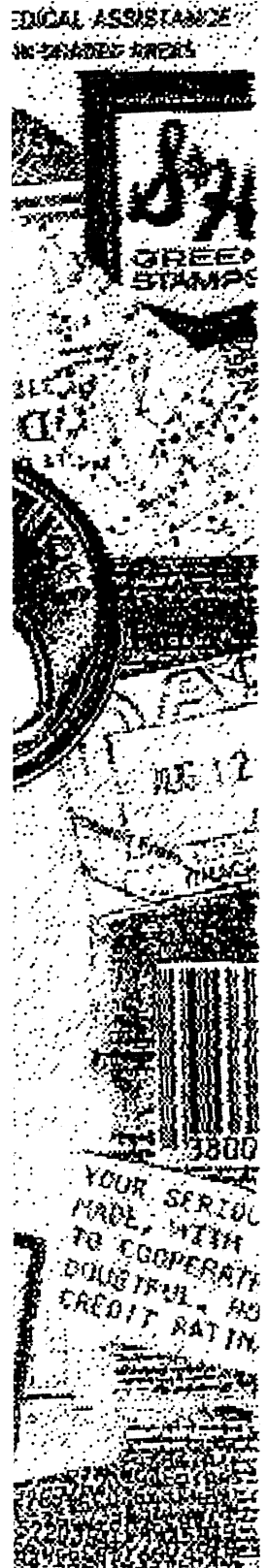
# PICASSO AND PÂTÉ DE FOIE GRAS: PIERRE BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

ELIZABETH WILSON

**Pierre Bourdieu.** *DISTINCTION: A SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF THE JUDGEMENT OF TASTE.* Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu elaborates a model of symbolic power describing the role of culture in the reproduction of social relations in contemporary France. Bourdieu, a French sociologist, attempts to mediate the opposed tendencies of objectivism and subjectivism in social science by means of a model in which subjects neither act freely in accordance with an unconstrained volition nor respond simply to objective structures that they cannot escape. Rather, subjects are seen to internalize objective structures and rearticulate them as free choices. Bourdieu's work may be seen as an empirically grounded examination of the dynamics of hegemony by which objectively unjust social systems are able to develop powerful mechanisms that effectively occlude the arbitrary basis of social inequality, enabling those systems to reproduce themselves, even against the "self-interest" of large segments of the population. My critique has two main themes. Using Adorno as an exemplary modernist, I show that a reception-oriented critique of modernism follows from Bourdieu's analysis. I then ask what the possibilities are for praxis or intervention in the socio-cultural system implied by Bourdieu's work.

By exploring the socio-economic origins of cultural taste, Bourdieu radically questions the "relative autonomy" of culture and articulates a way of mediating the relation between culture and economic or class status that attempts to resolve dialectically the structuralist-voluntarist tension marking many Marxist treatments of the question, that is, the tension arising from the ambiguity (inscribed in Marx) as to whether class is an objective condition (the relation to the means of production) or a subjective sense of class identity and shared political goals (class consciousness). Instead of jettisoning the category of class as reductive, economic, or inapplicable to contemporary "post-industrial" society, Bourdieu refines the categorical determinants to account for the effects of "cultural capital" (i.e., the status derived from education and modes of consumption), as well as "economic capital" (i.e., the status derived from material goods and income), *intra*-class struggles (among "class fractions"), and class trajectory. Like money or investments, culture has value; and possession (or lack) of cultural capital increases (or decreases) the social worth of the individual. "Class fractions" are differentiated by whether the origin of their social capital is primarily economic or cultural: thus, junior executives and primary school teachers represent different class fractions of the middle class. Bourdieu attempts to complicate the category of class according to as many factors as possible (age, sex, geographical location, trajectory, etc.), thus describing class in both structural and dynamic terms.



Articulated in three dimensions and across time, like a multilevel chess game, Bourdieu's model attempts to capture the play of class actors as they rise and fall and redistribute themselves throughout the social space.

In Bourdieu's view, culture is neither neutral nor morally edifying but constitutive of the semiotics of class struggle, in which class stratification is generated and maintained by patterns of consumption in food and home furnishings as well as in art. Bourdieu sees French society as structured by a "dialectic of downclassing and upclassing" by which all social groups compete (unequally) for the same goals established by the leading or dominant class. These goals ("properties") confer their status on those who possess them. However, the logic of the system dictates that they are unavailable to any but the dominant class for the reason that "whatever these properties may be intrinsically, they are modified and qualified by their distinctive rarity and will no longer be what they are once they are multiplied and made available to groups lower down" [163]. Thus the order of the system, the relatively stable differentials between groups, are maintained and exacerbated by the ceaseless generation of differences in "substantial" or "non-relational" properties. In such a system, the function of the avant-garde becomes the creation of new objects of distinctive rarity when previous objects have been debased by popularization [163].

What Bourdieu does most effectively is to demonstrate the relationship between the set of "objective conditions" that comprises the "universe of possibles" for any given subject and the subjective orientations that enable subjects to adapt to this objectively limited world. This adaptation and accommodation is effected by means of the "habitus," a key term which expresses the internalization of economic conditions and their rearticulation in a transposable network of cultural practices and in the capacity "to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products" [170], in other words, in class taste. In classical Marxist terms, the "habitus" conceptually renders a dialectical relation between base and superstructure and avoids the economic reductionism that Bourdieu feels is not only theoretically inadequate but empirically wrong. Admitting that "taste is almost always the product of economic conditions identical to those in which it functions," Bourdieu adds that the "causal efficacy" of economic conditions is exerted only "in association with" the habitus it has produced. "The specific efficacy of the habitus is clearly seen when the same income is associated with very different patterns of consumption, which can only be understood by assuming that other selection principles have intervened" [375–76].

The accommodation of class cultural practices to economic conditions ("necessity") that is effected by the "habitus" is accepted (even when not in the objective self-interest of subjects) because the legitimating consequences of its operation are "misrecognized." "Misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*) is a neologism that expresses the partial cognition generated by, and characteristic of, the action of symbolic power in class-stratified societies. The determining influence of economic conditions of existence are "misrecognized" if the cultural preferences they generate are taken to express a nature or essence rather than an arbitrary or accidental effect of the social distribution of power. Richard Nice, the translator of *Distinction*, offers the example of a "teacher who observes his pupils' 'gifts,' or lack of them, and who imagines he is indifferent to social class" and thus "objectively helps to legitimate the causes and effects of cultural inequality" [566n46]. Indeed, as an example, we may take the activity of the educational system itself, which inculcates "misrecognition" when it teaches the working class to recognize legitimate culture and legitimate modes of appropriating culture without teaching them to recognize the economic conditions that produce "legitimate" culture and "legitimate" modes of appropriation.

This is a summary of Bourdieu's general argument. By way of opening my critique, I will show how the analysis of *Distinction* applies to the cultural products of the intellectual class. It will be seen that Bourdieu's work has relevance for classical Marxist arguments about modernism, as well as general relevance for contemporary debates in literary criticism over the nature and function of aesthetic value.

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The educational system is the central mechanism in the legitimation of official culture. Within the system of education, the professional academies and university departments of

literature occupy an important place, for they represent the apex of academic culture and disinterested good taste. For several generations, American literary criticism in the academies has been dominated by ideas deriving largely from a group of "founding fathers" that includes, among others, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and John Crowe Ransom. Their ideas about the nature and purposes of literary study broke with the genteel critics and the professional philologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas genteel critics emphasized the continuity between art and life and philologists studied the historical background of literature, the modernists studied "the work itself" and stressed that "true" literature was ontologically different from life because literature was organized differently. That difference was form. Because of this emphasis on form, the literature preferred by these critics tended to be formally complex, allusive, difficult, and accessible only to a small segment of society. The critical formalism of many modern critics was the culmination of a historical process, begun in the late eighteenth century, that had redefined the social role of aesthetic activity. Instead of an aspect of moral and political life, the "aesthetic" was seen to be an autonomous realm characterized by lack of function in society.

Different historical arguments have been advanced to explain the emergence of aesthetic autonomy, including technological innovation, changes in the structure of the art market (guilds, patronage, etc.), and the progressive division of labor under capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the "ultimate" causes, it can scarcely be denied that the political traumas of the mid-twentieth century, such as fascism and Stalinism, catalyzed the legitimation of the idea of aesthetic autonomy by demonstrating (irrefutably to some) the malign social and artistic effects of the subordination of art to larger ethical or political goals. Critics came to see "form" as the aspect of the work of art able to resist totalitarianism as well as capitalist instrumentalism. The effects of the politics of literary criticism in this period were to validate the emerging characterization of the "literary" (a sub-category of the aesthetic) as the specifically formal aspect of the work. Of the numerous critics engaged in this project of redefinition, none produced a more impressive defense of modern art than Theodor Adorno. In many ways mirroring conservative defenses of high culture (through an inverted elitism), Adorno's work may be taken as exemplary. Because he situates himself in the Marxist tradition and because he is also a sociologist of culture, Adorno is particularly appropriate to set in dialogue with Bourdieu.<sup>2</sup>

As I cannot hope to preserve the dialectical complexity of Adorno's work in a summary treatment, my discussion will focus primarily on one essay, "Commitment," and one book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, because they address two issues relevant for the present paper: the politics of form and the cultural domination of the masses. My point here is not to produce a fully nuanced summary of Adorno's aesthetic theory but to use him to exemplify a practice that may be called revolutionary modernism.<sup>3</sup> The claim of those who practice, or claim to practice, revolutionary modernism is that experiments in form enact radical transformations on the material of psychic and social reality, transformations that are or can be political and salutary in their effects. In short, what I am calling revolutionary modernism comprises all those theories holding that modernist experiments are subversive of or threatening to the social order. Exponents of different versions of revolutionary modernism range from the Frankfurt School to the writers of *Partisan Review* to the group associated with *Tel Quel*. Viewing intellectual and aesthetic production as a potential substitute for or alternative to traditional political praxis, the theory of revolutionary modernism holds that the deformation of usual cognitive categories disrupts the epistemological

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of studies into the historical constitution of the autonomous sphere of art, see Peter Bürger [35–46].

<sup>2</sup>Given that Bourdieu obviously does not adhere to the political program of orthodox Marxism, it may seem unduly appropriative to situate him in that tradition. But fundamental concepts from the Marxist paradigm are essential, if sometimes unacknowledged, components of Bourdieu's model throughout *Distinction*. For example, the distinction, so crucial to Bourdieu's analysis, between the world of necessity and the world of freedom can also be found in Marx, where it refers to the opposition between a world where labor is determined by necessity and a world where the development of human energy is an end in itself. "Misrecognition" bears an obvious resemblance to "false consciousness"; "dispossession" is a kind of "alienated labor."

<sup>3</sup>I have borrowed this term from Alexander Bloom. See his *Prodigal Sons*.

foundations on which oppressive social orders are founded and thus functions (either actively or passively) to resist and subvert that order.

In "Commitment," Adorno states: "The principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects but their own inherent structure" [317]. For art to allow itself to become a weapon in political struggle is to submit to the means-oriented rationality that is the source of all current political repression. Adorno goes so far as to say, "The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world" [317]. Form is that which organizes the elements of reality according to its own laws [314] and protests against the instrumentalism that reduces difference and uniqueness to the grim identity of the same. "Even the avant-garde abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines, and which has nothing in common with conceptual or logical abstraction, is a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society" [314]. Through form, art relates to nature through a process of resemblance rather than domination. Its materialism preserves the idea of a relation to nature that is reciprocal, not coercive.

Adorno is sensitive to the potential irrelevance and irresponsibility of a *l'art pour l'art* ideology. For him, authentic art has a dialectical relation to reality. Produced by reality and directed back towards it, authentic art is critical even as it is utopian:

*Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden "it should be otherwise." When a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pure pseudo-scientific construction, it becomes bad art—literally pre-artistic. The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be. As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life. [317]*

But the critical utopianism of avant-garde art is distinguished sharply from the false utopianism of bourgeois art. Bourgeois art "hypostatized itself as a world of freedom in contrast to what was happening in the material world" and was "from the beginning bought with the exclusion of the lower classes" [*Dialectic* 135]. "[T]he real universality, art keeps faith" with the lower classes "precisely by its freedom from the ends of the false universality" [*Dialectic* 135]. The implication is that abstraction "provokes the indignation of the philistines" because they sense in it resistance to the rationality they would impose. Because of this resistance, avant-garde art is the only art that maintains genuine solidarity with the lower classes, even if they cannot actually comprehend it.

The emphasis on form has further implications for the subject matter of art. The avant-garde distinguishes itself from traditional art not just by experiments in non-representationality but also by its willingness to treat as art subjects previously rejected as inappropriate or unworthy of representation, such as everyday objects and discarded people. Modern art attacks the "beautiful" and the "affirmative" in art, ensuring that autonomous art can no longer figure as a delusive "world of freedom" set apart from reality as a repository of unattainable ideals. Peter Wolin offers an excellent summary of Adorno on this point:

*[One] of the salient features of the process of de-aestheticization, which is decisive for modernism, is its rehabilitation of the concept of ugliness. By making ugliness thematic, modernism emphasizes its solidarity with the oppressed, the non-identical, those elements of society that have been anathematized by the dominant powers of social control; it thus seeks to give voice to those forces that are commonly denied expression in the extra-aesthetic world. . . . The notion that something ugly can be "beautiful," that in fact it can be beautiful precisely because it is ugly, opens immense, previously untapped horizons of experience for art and ultimately leaves its mark on modernism in all its forms. One of the great achievements of modernism has been not only a tremendous democratization of the subject matter of art, but also an important extension of the boundaries of the permissible in art. [114]*



The expansion of subject matter is especially significant for literature, because the verbal medium is, by nature, unable to attain complete non-representationality. Beckett's strange and difficult characters represent what human beings have become in the modern world ["Commitment" 314]. Adorno thus retains mimesis at some level as an aesthetic category, but it is a symbolic and attenuated mimesis with no designs upon the world.

Bourdieu's understanding of the social function of modern art is precisely opposed to that of Adorno on virtually every point. Rather than seeing the avant-garde as the product of a small cadre heroically resisting instrumentalism, Bourdieu sees the avant-garde as culminating the tendency of bourgeois society to bracket off the aesthetic as a functionless world. For Bourdieu, there is no authentic art, "a real universality" in solidarity with the oppressed. There are just more or less "legitimated" arts, whose value has been produced and reproduced by the social mechanisms that transmit cultural competence and legitimacy. Bourdieu's socio-economically grounded reception aesthetics explores the way the "aesthetic" functions in the social system of contemporary France to differentiate classes of perceivers. In this highly stratified class society, the ability to appreciate form performs as a litmus test of status.

Bourdieu empirically "measures" aesthetic taste by asking subjects to respond to a series of photographs. He finds, quite consistently, that subjects with small amounts of cultural capital (inferior educations, no family heritage) evaluate as "good" only photographs of objects in themselves deemed worthy of representation (e.g., as beautiful or noble) and dislike photographs of objects considered ugly or otherwise unworthy of representation. Bourdieu's research discovers a "correlation between educational capital and the propensity or at least the aspiration to appreciate a work 'independently of its content,' as the culturally most ambitious respondents put it" [53]. He recognizes further that most discourses on culture (especially those of individuals with the greatest investments in culture) actively obscure this correlation. For this reason, he concludes that legitimate culture, "consciously and deliberately or not" fulfills "a social function of legitimating social differences" [7]. That is to say, cultural codes of consumption, related to the economic conditions of existence through the mediation of the habitus, produce the system of tastes and the networks of classification that make the social privileges and deficiencies which are accidents of birth seem natural and right. This argument may be elaborated upon.

In one of his most elegant formulations, Bourdieu sees the production of surplus wealth and leisure as the condition of possibility of an aesthetic consciousness or "disposition," which is the phenomenological correlate to an objectively autonomous sphere of aesthetic production: "[the aesthetic disposition] presupposes the distance from the world . . . which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world" [54]. Bourdieu inductively concludes a continuity and homology between the freedom from material want both objectively extant and subjectively experienced by the bourgeoisie and the cultural articulations of that experience in varieties of formalism in life and art.

*The aesthetic disposition which tends to bracket off the nature and function of the object represented and to exclude any 'naive' reaction—horror at the horrible, desire for the desirable, pious reverence for the sacred—along with all purely ethical responses, in order to concentrate solely upon the mode of representation, the style, perceived and appreciated by comparison with other styles, is one dimension of a total relation to the world and to others, a life-style, in which the effects of particular conditions of existence are expressed in a 'misrecognizable' form. [54]*

For Bourdieu, the attention of the bourgeoisie to the forms of living, to personal grooming and interior decoration, to refined modes of entertainment and polite formalities of speech, are the "material of a social psychoanalysis," for they manifest a relation to the world whose real import may be unconscious to the subject. The "relationship of distinction (which may or may not imply the conscious intention of distinguishing oneself from common people)" is not, according to Bourdieu, "an incidental component in the aesthetic disposition," for the disinterested gaze "implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards

the world which, as such, is a social break" [31]. Bourdieu concurs with, but does not approve, the assessment of the conservative Ortega y Gasset on the social function of modern art: "[it] helps the 'best' to know and recognize one another in the greyness of the multitude and to learn their mission, which is to be few in number and to have to fight against the multitude" [31]. The "disinterested" love of culture becomes an emblem of moral superiority, representing the bearer's distance from vulgar, material needs. Through culture, the chosen grasp their rarity, the unworthy their exclusion.

Whereas, for the bourgeoisie, formalism expresses their distance from the world of necessity (and thus from other social classes), for the dominated classes formalism impedes their participation in the world of legitimate culture; their inability to appreciate it reinforces their sense of cultural and social unworthiness. In contrast to the popular aesthetic, which "immers[es] itself in the singularity of the work immediately given" [34], the disinterested aesthetic attends to the specifically "artistic" effects of art, which "are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works" [34]. (Paradoxically, then, the "democratization" of the subject matter of modern art does not democratize the audience or the experience of art.) The aesthetic displacement from "the 'content,' characters, plot etc., to the form" produces alienation and a sense of exclusion among the uninitiated:

*Everything takes place as if the working-class audience vaguely grasped what is implied in conspicuous formality, both in art and in life, i.e., a sort of censorship of the expressive content which explodes in the expressiveness of popular language, and by the same token, a distancing, inherent in the calculated coldness of all formal exploration, a refusal to communicate concealed at the heart of the communication itself, both in an art which takes back and refuses what it seems to deliver and in bourgeois politeness, whose impeccable formalism is a permanent warning against the temptation of familiarity. [34]*

This alienation has material origins, for the understanding of the symbolic content of formalist works requires that the perceiver possess a certain amount of cultural capital (acquired either through education or through early exposure to the arts) in order to enjoy them.

Bourdieu's analysis demystifies the social role of the artist and intellectual in bourgeois society by locating them in the social space of the dominant class. Whereas for Adorno the refusal of the modernist avant-garde to submit to instrumentality gives it a critical and utopian element, Bourdieu sees the non-instrumentalism and purposelessness espoused by dominant sectors of the intelligentsia and the artistic world as absolutely continuous with the broader attempt of the bourgeoisie to differentiate itself from those classes constrained by the world of necessity. Far from being situated outside the class structure, artists and intellectuals are situated in a contradictory space within the class structure.<sup>4</sup> Because they have relatively little economic capital but high volumes of cultural capital, they belong to the dominant class as its "poor relations" and are best understood as constituting, along with secondary school and university teachers, the dominated class fraction of the dominant class. Alienated from the commercial bourgeoisie but nevertheless of it, artists and intellectuals oppose their disinterestedness not only to the materialism of the bourgeoisie but to the materialism, motivated by real economic need, of the lower classes as well. According to Bourdieu,

*The struggle between the dominant fractions and the dominated fractions . . . tends . . . to be organized by oppositions that are almost superimposable on those which the dominant vision sets up between the dominant class and the dominated classes: on the one hand, freedom, disinterestedness, the "purity" of sublimated tastes, salvation in the hereafter; on the other, necessity, self-interest, base material*

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Fussell's arrogant Class exhibits typical intellectual misrecognition in his apparent belief that "bohemians" (including intellectuals, artists, sports stars (!), "well-to-do former hippies, confirmed residents abroad, and the more gifted journalists" [212] constitute an "X" way out of the class structure, "X" being a non-categorical category denoting those who escape their class origins and from an "unmonied aristocracy" [213].

*satisfactions, salvation in this world. It follows that all the strategies which intellectuals and artists produce against the "bourgeois" inevitably tend, quite apart from any explicit intention, and by virtue of the structure of the space in which they are generated, to be dual-action devices, directed indifferently against all forms of subjection to material interests, popular as much as bourgeois. . . . This essential overdetermination explains how the "bourgeois" can so easily use the art produced against them as a means of demonstrating their distinction, whenever they seek to show that, compared to the dominated, they are on the side of "disinterestedness," "freedom," "purity," and the "soul," thus turning against the other classes weapons designed for use against themselves. [254]*

Thus the dominant and dominated class fractions are, like the serpent and the eagle, locked in a mortal struggle to establish the terms of domination. The teachers, who "hardly ever have the means to match their tastes," adopt versions of "ascetic aestheticism" that exchange (out of necessity) "Romanian carpets for Persian carpets, a converted barn for an ancestral manor-house, lithographs (or reproductions) for paintings" [287]. These "unavowed substitutes . . . like really poor people's leatherette or 'sparkling white' wine, are the tributes deprivation pays to possession" [287]. But the intellectual fractions have their own "strategies for outflanking, overtaking and displacing," which by "maintaining a permanent revolution in tastes," secure exclusive possessions: "Intellectuals and artists have a special predilection for the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power, which is peculiarly theirs, to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode, by other classes or class fractions (e.g., kitsch)" [282]. Thus the dominated class fraction of the dominant class has the privilege of determining legitimate culture, of declaring what is and is not art, of setting the rules for the game of culture.

Viewed through the glass of Bourdieu's sociology, Adorno appears as an apologist for the intellectual class. Bourdieu's model enables us to interpret as typical intellectual misrecognition Adorno's argument that modern high culture is subversive and genuinely resistant to the mass-produced and highly reified culture manipulated by corporate sponsors. High culture for Bourdieu is, as we have seen, not subversive, for the cultured elite and the monied elite struggle only to establish the terms of domination and ultimately cooperate against the dispossessed and uncultured. What distorts Adorno's position further is that he fails to objectify the social space of his own discourse and remains "an arrogant theoretician . . . too viscerally attached to the values and profits of Culture to be able to make it an object of science" [*Distinction* 511]. He thus takes at face value the hostility of the avant-garde to the dominant class and its cultural products (lavish productions, Broadway theater, etc.), not seeing that this contempt contains a measure of *ressentiment*. Adorno fails to grasp the negatively dialectical relation between the dominant and dominated class fractions of the dominant class: "Because those who take part in a game agree on the stakes, at least sufficiently to fight for them, one may choose to emphasize either the complicities which unite them in hostility or the hostilities which separate them in complicity" [*Distinction* 316]. By "explaining" modern art without asking who is producing it or consuming it and in what contexts, Adorno misrecognizes the social function of aesthetic culture.

Thus, like many cultural theorists influenced by Marxism, Bourdieu takes up a kind of anti-modernist position. He shares with Georg Lukács, the greatest anti-modernist cultural theorist, an epistemological predilection for a realm of objectivity beyond subjective representations, while acknowledging that objects are constituted through frames of interpretation. For Bourdieu, the objective space is the most important element in social reconstruction. Phenomenological representations may be relevant but only at a secondary interpretive level. The difference between Bourdieu and Lukács is the difference between a study of reception that asks, "What is the social function of art?" and an immanent analysis that asks, "What is the form?" As Peter Bürger has observed, both Lukács and Adorno, in producing their respective theories of art, explicate the meanings of texts through formal analysis and ignore the social function of texts. Bourdieu takes a different approach, suggesting that modernism has a conservative social function because of the way it is *circulated* and *received*: more than realist art, modernist art requires knowledge of and



education in the tradition. To classical Marxist debates on modernism, Bourdieu contributes a study of audience response.

Bourdieu's interest in audience enables him to bypass the debate over the leftist potential of modernism conducted in such journals as *Screen* and *Tel Quel*. He feels no need to mention Brecht's experiments in modernism for the working classes. Clearly, Bourdieu's critique of the intellectual class fraction is more damaging to leftist intellectuals, for, according to the logic of his analysis, theirs has been the greater misrecognition. For the most part, the salutary effects of cultural work are taken for granted by intellectuals of both the left and right, but there is a difference in their respective claims. Right-wing intellectuals at least admit an interest in preserving the *status quo*; leftist intellectuals hope or believe they are subverting it, while repressing the contradiction that their discourse operates only within highly circumscribed and elite contexts.

The "vulgar" power of Bourdieu's critique tempts one to overlook difficulties with his general argument. But *Distinction* is not without certain problems. Bourdieu's aesthetic categories, particularly avant-garde, are inadequately, and never formally, defined. Avant-garde and modern art are used interchangeably. At different times, Bourdieu uses them to signify all non-representational art, all art produced in the modern period, even all art appropriated in formal terms. Realism, as the ground for the "popular aesthetic," is taken as a self-evident category, not a coded system of convention open to semiotic inquiry. Realism and modernism, the two poles of his analysis, are thus in constant danger of being reified into immutably opposed terms. The historically contingent nature of their social inscription is thereby obscured.

According to Bourdieu, distance from the world of economic necessity brings forth an autonomous sphere of aesthetic production that produces an entire mode of apprehending its autonomous products autonomously and an intellectual articulation of this mode to justify it. Unlike Adorno, for whom the fragmentation and disjunction of modernism is the only form of art able to express the anguish of the human spirit under capitalism, Bourdieu sees nothing specifically capitalist about the socio-economic condition of the bourgeoisie. He engages in none of the macro-economic generalizations typical of Marxist cultural theorists and appears uninterested in the relation of the paradigm of the avant-garde to consumer society. Thus he insists upon a homology between aesthetic autonomy and the bourgeois relation to the world without characterizing that relation in more specific terms. One consequence of this insistence is that competition and the need to achieve social distinction appear as invariant characteristics of human beings in society, rather than as the product of particular socio-economic arrangements.

A further consequence is that surplus wealth appears as the sufficient cause for the development of a theory and practice of aesthetic autonomy. If surplus wealth, defined as freedom from economic necessity, were the only condition necessary to produce such a theory and practice, then every society able to achieve a certain level of material wealth (defined relatively, of course) would seem likely to develop such a theory and practice. But this is manifestly not the case. It is clear that the courtly aristocracy did not possess anything like an articulated theory of aesthetic autonomy or a non-representational art.<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu's eagerness to pursue the bourgeois/aristocratic analogy (and demonstrate "The Aristocracy of Culture," the title of his first chapter) leads him to imply, for instance, that the bourgeoisie differ from the court aristocracy (who "made the whole of life a continuous spectacle") only in the forms by which they differentiate the world of freedom from the world of necessity. Because he ignores the gap between the social conditions of aristocratic and bourgeois societies, in particular the difference between an ideology of fixed rank and one of social mobility, because he does not respect the difference between aristocratic and bourgeois notions of poetic function (or lack of function), his remarks on the relation of aesthetic autonomy to socio-economic conditions remain speculative.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>For two discussions of Renaissance aristocratic attitudes to and uses of culture in specific contrast to the "autonomy" and "lack of function" of culture in bourgeois society, see Peter Bürger [47–54] and Jane Tompkins [206–14].

<sup>6</sup>Recently, Bourdieu has offered a more specific analysis to account for the emergence of the theory of aesthetic autonomy. In "Flaubert's Point of View," Bourdieu suggests that aesthetic autonomy was

Marxian cultural studies often distinguish themselves from other cultural studies by a critical attitude toward their objects and by an emphasis on change and intervention. Such studies strive to realize Marx's famous injunction in the *Theses on Feuerbach* not merely to interpret the world but to change it. For Adorno, notoriously the most pessimistic of all Marxian theorists, modern art is the last possible vehicle for resistance in an increasingly "administered world," the only "agent" (defined negatively) of the change called for by Marx. If we accept Bourdieu's model, we are led to renounce the social criticism that has been the traditional province of the intellectual and to nullify the only element in Adorno's system capable of subverting it from within. Adorno's belief in the antipathy of art to capitalism must be seen as the product of his position in the class structure of society, specifically, of the privileged position conferred on the custodians of culture.<sup>7</sup> The logical next question is whether Bourdieu's system allows *anything* to escape it and thus potentially to resist it. At times, the system of hegemony described by Bourdieu seems hermetically closed and able to reduce all elements within it to grist for the mill of its functioning.

In a sense, there can be no politics in a closed system, no dissenting action and no possibility for change. But given that complete closure is a practical impossibility, we may ask, "What are the possibilities for change that follow from Bourdieu's analysis in *Distinction*?" This question is paramount for leftist intellectuals, for his study invalidates their primary avenue of resistance. Bourdieu himself invites this inquiry, for *Distinction* is marked by a tension between the desire to describe objective structures and the desire to intervene in and transform them. His prose, usually analytical and ponderous, reaches occasional rhetorical heights:

*If there is any terrorism, it is in the peremptory verdicts which, in the name of taste, condemn to ridicule, indignity, shame, silence (here one could give examples, taken from everyone's familiar universe), men and women who simply fall short, in the eyes of their judges, of the right way of being and doing; it is in the symbolic violence through which the dominant groups endeavour to impose their own life-style, and which abounds in the glossy weekly magazines: 'Conforama is the Guy Lux of furniture,' says Le Nouvel Observateur, which will never tell you that the Nouvel Obs is the Club Méditerranée of culture. There is terrorism in all such remarks, flashes of self-interested lucidity sparked off by class hatred or contempt. [511]*

It may be said that Bourdieu implies that change in the system can develop along three lines or directions: a mechanical change in the structures organizing the system; intervention by the dominated class; intervention by the dominant class, particularly that aspect of the "dominated class fraction of the dominant class" comprised of academic sociologists. I will suggest further that these lines of intervention exist in *Distinction* as unreconciled forces tending to diverge.

Let us begin with the possibility of structural change. In an introduction to Bourdieu's sociology, Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams declare, "If to be as objective as

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*a position strategically adopted by artists in response to the growing influence of the market:*

*This symbolic revolution, whereby artists emancipated themselves from bourgeois standards by refusing to acknowledge any master other than their art, had the effect of making the market disappear. . . . [T]he Christly mystique of the "accursed artist" ('l'artiste maudit') sacrificed in this world and consecrated in the next, was undoubtedly the idealized or professionalized retranscription of the specific contradiction of the mode of production that the pure artist aimed to establish. It was in effect an upside-down economy where the artist could win in the symbolical arena only by losing in the economic one (at least in the short term) and vice versa. [553]*

<sup>7</sup>Commentators on Adorno such as Martin Jay have noted that Adorno's "visceral distaste for mass culture, unrelieved hostility towards bureaucratic domination, and untempered aversion to technological, instrumental reason were all earmarks of a consciousness formed in the wake of what has been called the decline of German mandarins" [Jay 17].

possible about the possibilities of a major and immediate transformation of the social formation of advanced capitalism is to be pessimistic, then Bourdieu is, rightly in our view, pessimistic" [222]. But since the task of theory is to discover gaps and fissures within a hegemonic system, to "locat[e] the moments of praxis within a given social and historical structure" [Howard 9] that open the system, however slightly, to change from within, Garnham and Williams are right to object to "a functionalist-determinist residue in Bourdieu's concept of reproduction which leads him to place less emphasis on the possibilities of real change and innovation than either his theory or his empirical research makes necessary" [222]. At certain points, as in the chapter called "The Social Space and Its Transformation," Bourdieu sees the possibility for change as resulting from a shift in objective structures that would only secondarily (and Bourdieu himself does not mention the possibility) open up a space for praxis in relation to it: "Everything suggests that an abrupt slump in objective chances relative to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance which the dominated classes—now abruptly excluded from the race, objectively and subjectively—previously granted to the dominant goals, and so to make possible a genuine inversion of the table of values" [168]. Bourdieu sees the working out of this structural possibility in the emergence of the adolescent counterculture in France in the '60s. The post-war generation, "whose social identity and self-image have been undermined by a social system and an educational system that have fobbed them off with worthless paper," protests against this "structural de-skilling of a whole generation" by withholding the investments necessary to perpetuate the system and denouncing the "tacit assumptions of the social order" [144]. (It is a large question whether this explanation applies to the United States.) Anyone familiar with Alvin Gouldner's thesis of "the two Marxisms" will recognize presuppositions resembling those of scientific Marxism in these remarks. Scientific Marxism locates changes in the evolution of structural arrangements, developments in the technological means of production, exacerbation of social contradiction, etc. rather than in individual and class political praxis. Scientific Marxism considers revolutionary agitation to be ineffectual ultra-leftism, if it is conducted when the structural conditions of revolution are absent. The problem with a scientific Marxist approach is that it implies that the system will self-destruct of its own accord, thus inviting passivism and millennial expectations. That Bourdieu suggests other possibilities for intervention in the system indicates his hesitancy to rely solely on mechanical changes in structure. The other two possibilities represent just the kind of political interventions declared irrelevant by scientific Marxism. The problem is that both encounter contradictions that undermine their strategic power.

Let me use the discussion of the second possibility for intervention, dominated-class politics, as an opportunity to examine the view of non-elite culture presented by *Distinction*. Bourdieu seems to see in popular culture "only the scattered fragments of an old erudite culture (such as folk medicine), selected and reinterpreted in terms of the fundamental principles of the class habitus and integrated into the unitary world view it engenders" [395] and not what he hopes to find, "a culture truly raised in opposition to the dominant culture and consciously claimed as a symbol of status or a declaration of separate existence" [395]. In a chapter entitled "Cultural Goodwill" Bourdieu discusses the desire of the petite bourgeoisie to belong to the dominant culture, a desire which manifests itself in a "cultural allodoxia, that is, all the mistaken identifications and false recognitions which betray the gap between acknowledgement and knowledge" [323]. The petit bourgeois, he writes, "bows, just in case, to everything which looks as if it might be culture and uncritically venerates the aristocratic traditions of the past" [323]. According to Bourdieu, "this middle-brow culture (*culture moyenne*) owes some of its charm, in the eyes of the middle classes who are its main consumers, to the references to legitimate culture it contains" [323]. Indeed, middlebrow culture is an "imposture" which must rely on the "complicity of the consumers" [323]. "This complicity is guaranteed in advance since, in culture as elsewhere, the consumption of 'imitations' is a kind of unconscious bluff which chiefly deceives the bluffer, who has most interest in taking the copy for the original, like the purchasers of 'seconds,' 'rejects,' cut-price or second-hand goods, who need to convince themselves that 'it's cheaper and creates the same effect'" [323]. If Bourdieu dislikes dominant culture because it enforces the sense of distinction among the elect and the sense of exclusion

among the excluded, he seems to dislike even more all forms of non-dominant culture because they *acknowledge* legitimate culture, because they are all, in their own way, “non-subversive.” After giving a few examples of “the partial revolutions in the hierarchies” carried out by “the new cultural intermediaries” who produce culture programs for TV or radio (some examples are “television programmes uniting jazz and symphonic extracts, music-hall and chamber music, string quartets and gypsy orchestras”), Bourdieu dismisses them shortly: “Nothing could be less subversive than these controlled transgressions which are inspired by a concern to rehabilitate and ennoble when they are not simply the expression of a misplaced recognition of the hierarchies, as anarchic as it is eager” [326].

Neither does the working class fare any better. Although passages can be found in which Bourdieu characterizes the non-dominant aesthetic as convivial and exuberant and although he seems to express enthusiasm for the music-hall and for “all forms of the comic and especially those working through satire or parody of the ‘great’ . . . which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties” [34], he asserts elsewhere that the “art of eating and drinking” is one of the “few areas” where the working classes “explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living” [179]. The working classes differ from the petite bourgeoisie chiefly in their lack of cultural ambition. Being realistically adjusted to their “objective chances,” the working class exhibits a humble taste for the necessary; they learn to “desire” those cultural goods which are their lot nevertheless. Since they are unlikely to acquire “symbolic profits,” they do not value them and “reduce practices or objects to their technical function”: a plain dress, “solid” furniture [379]. Wholly absent from the working-class home is the bourgeois aestheticism which sees every room as the occasion for an “aesthetic choice”; decorative touches in the working-class home are governed by a system of conventions that instills respect for the “done thing.” These systems of decorative conventions are continuous with systems of social conventions which circumscribe the working class within the limited orbit of their milieu. According to Bourdieu, the “principle of conformity” is the only “explicit norm of popular taste” [380]. The working classes thus do not permit the slightest deviations in lifestyle to those who belong to the same class. Such deviations are taken as evidence of ambition and thus a violation of class solidarity. In the realm of culture, the working classes are mostly served by the “mass market”—repetitive music whose “structures invite a passive, absent participation,” “prefabricated entertainments which the new engineers of cultural mass production design for television viewers,” and sporting events which erect rigid boundaries between spectator and participant and in which “dispossession of the very intention of determining one’s own ends is combined with a more insidious form of recognition of dispossession” [386]. Though he writes about the petit-bourgeois and working classes with a poignancy and insight that is rare among intellectuals of any stripe, Bourdieu does not wholly escape contempt for their passive participation in a game of culture they cannot win. In short, Bourdieu sees mass culture as “prefabricated” (the word itself recalls *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*) by social engineers and passively accepted by the classes at which it is directed.

It is fitting that Bourdieu refers to Adorno within a discussion of the repetitive structure of mass-produced music. Bourdieu criticizes Adorno for making a “direct, naive analogy” between the form and uses of popular music and the “world of alienated labor” and (modestly) corrects him with a stricter Marxism: “What the relation to ‘mass’ (and, a fortiori, ‘elite’) cultural products reproduces, reactivates and reinforces is not the monotony of the production line or office but the social relation which underlies working-class experience of the world, whereby his labour and the product of his labour, *opus proprium*, present themselves to the worker as *opus alienum*, ‘alienated’ labour” [386]. It does not take a specialist to realize that this objection addresses only a minor aspect of Adorno’s writing on mass culture. Moreover, this constitutes the only reference to Adorno within the body of the text. (There is another, previously quoted, found in the Appendix.)

One could speculate on reasons for this effacement of Adorno, for the fact is that Bourdieu and Adorno are strikingly similar when it comes to structural descriptions of mass culture. Either one, for example, could have written the following sentence: “Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling



consumers" [*Dialectic* 123]. Adorno sees the pervasive "sameness" of mass culture as resulting from the totalitarian expression (through mass culture) of the compulsion to rationality and Enlightenment [*Dialectic* xvi]; whereas *all* culture (mass and high) appears the "same" for Bourdieu because the substantive differences in culture are less important than their relative value as counters in a game of status, a race of running—and running to catch up. Bourdieu on popular music ("passive, absent participation") sounds like Adorno on movies: "The sound film, far surpassing the theater of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the masses" [*Dialectic* 126]. Where Adorno explains the deception of the masses by observing, "Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them" [*Dialectic* 133]; Bourdieu blames the pervasive misrecognition of the masses on "primary education [which] has inculcated a recognition without knowledge" [*Distinction* 396]. Both see mass culture as essentially a "mass deception" [*Dialectic* 120] imposed on the masses by the dominant class (or by members of their own class acting as conduits for the dominant ethos). The "choices" of the dominated classes are therefore not "choices" in any meaningful sense at all. They are forced products of a manipulating system through which the consent of the dominated is extracted without their awareness. Completely absent from both Adorno and Bourdieu is the position suggested (though not wholly maintained) by Patrick Brantlinger in *Bread and Circuses* that sees mass culture as an unprecedented historical achievement with liberating as well as totalitarian potential. Bourdieu writes without the benefit of recent American work in mass culture studies that has attempted to divest itself of traditional intellectual prejudice against mass culture by attempting to enter the subjective space of mass culture consumers. The result has been a reconstruction of mass culture as a contradictory phenomenon.

The negative terms in which Bourdieu sees mass culture present a challenge to realizing the second possibility of intervention in the system of cultural domination, what I have called dominated-class politics. Vaguely resembling the Marxist model of revolution, this possibility for intervention calls for an expropriation of the means of (cultural) production. Through such an expropriation, the dominated can "regain control of their social identity" [384], can assert their preferences without shame, and thus constitute culture politically as an arena of conflict. Bourdieu offers two possibilities for the political constitution of the sphere of culture. The dominated can either valorize "stigmatized properties" or create "new, positively evaluated properties" [384]. (It should be noted that the only two specific examples he offers, the "natural look" of American feminists and the "Black is beautiful" cry of the Black Power movement, are examples taken from a culture other than French.) Bourdieu does seem interested at some level in validating the aesthetic of the working class; but insofar as their primary cultural fare is mass culture, insofar as they are the ones who "set off in their Renault 5 or Simca 1000 to join the great traffic jams of the holiday exodus, who picnic beside major roads, cram their tents into overcrowded campsites, fling themselves into the prefabricated leisure activities designed for them by the engineers of cultural mass production" [179], it is not clear how this validation would occur, who would validate, and through what concrete forms. The negativism of Bourdieu's view of mass culture creates a practical aporia that his merely incidental politics cannot overcome. In the absence of an analysis capable of seeing mass culture as a site of ideological complexity and thus of potential resistance, Bourdieu does not escape the analytical limitations and political estrangement of the Frankfurt School.

Given the deficiencies of popular culture from Bourdieu's perspective, it follows that the only way to *intervene* actively in the system of domination is to bring it to self-consciousness and alter the perceptual schemes by which it is constituted. If we are determined by our position in the social field, the only way to escape this determinism is through self-consciousness. This brings us to the third possibility for intervention, dominant-class politics, which privileges the activity of the sociologist as the only player in the system fully cognizant of the systemic inscription of the other positions. The whole of *Distinction* can be read in terms of this possibility for intervention: "Only the effort required to construct the field of struggles within which the partial viewpoints and antagonistic strategies are defined can give access to a knowledge which differs from the blind insights of the participants without becoming the sovereign gaze of the impartial observer" [511]. "Only"



the effort of the *sociologist*, in other words, is able to attain real “knowledge” which is unavailable to the “blind” participants in the system, but the difference between such knowledge and the “sovereign gaze of the impartial observer” is asserted rather than proven. Working-class activism is shown to be inadequate because it is unable to perform sophisticated mediations relating the “particular case to its ultimate foundations in political economy” [434]. With all culture, elite and popular, implicated in the legitimation of elite culture, the implied hope of *Distinction* is that demystification will disrupt the process of legitimation. A footnote suggests that sociology challenges the technocratic elite, who normally monopolize discourse, by questioning “any Tom, Dick or Harry instead of consulting only the authorized spokesmen” [592], a transgression that is said to inspire “horror” among the French philosophical intelligentsia. Sociology may produce horror in the philosophers. Yet it might be said that the horrors of sociology are at best “controlled transgressions,” not at all unlike those performed by the cultural intermediaries of the petite bourgeoisie. Bourdieu’s claims for sociology might be accepted if he provided strategies to relate such work to working-class politics or at least recognized the need to do so as a correlate to his analysis. But, perhaps constrained by the limits of academic discourse, he does not touch upon the concrete and laborious praxis needed to overcome the inertia of institutions and thus to change objective structures.

Whereas the other interpreters of the game of culture “tacitly agree in leaving hidden” the objective structure of the game, Bourdieu’s model is committed to avoiding the “self-interested representations of culture which ‘intellectuals’ and ‘bourgeois’ endlessly fling at each other” [12]. The “objectivism” to which Bourdieu aspires, it need hardly be asserted, in no way resembles the objectivism of positive science, for his objectivism discovers the social motivations behind structures that positivism sees as arbitrary or fortuitous. Yet this objective position is uneasy to maintain and remains insufficiently distinguished from disinterestedness. It is almost as if to declare his partisanship would require Bourdieu to abdicate the seat of objectivity and embrace a “self-interested” representation that is necessarily partial.

According to Bourdieu, objectification is bound to remain partial “so long as it fails to include the point of view from which it speaks” [12]. Yet it is fair to ask whether Bourdieu ever really attempts to objectify his own position and discourse. This paragraph lays bare the tensions that would necessarily accompany such an objectification:

*Objectification is only complete when it objectifies the site of objectification, the unseen standpoint, the blind spot of all theories—the intellectual field and its conflicts of interest, in which sometimes, by a necessary accident, an interest in truth is generated—and also the subtle contributions it makes to the maintenance of the symbolic order, even through the purely symbolic intention of subversion which is usually assigned to it in the division of the labour of domination. [511]*

The syntactic breakdown in the end of this passage betrays uneasiness. The work of sociology subtly contributes to the maintenance of the symbolic order, even though it is assigned (by whom?) a “purely symbolic” intention of subversion? The logic of this assertion appears to contradict the implication that sociology can produce resistance to a hermetic system. The threat to Bourdieu’s project implicit in this admission is betrayed by the strategic location of this passage, which is buried deep in the first Appendix. The cultural containment of intellectual “subversion” is thus recognized but not integrated into the analysis.

This containment, furthermore, is partially generated by the constraints of style and logic imposed on academic writing, which serve to defamiliarize the content and distance the uninitiated from understanding. One could replicate Bourdieu’s study on a smaller scale within the field of literary criticism in America where terms and stylistic devices from French thought have been imported in the service of a critical avant-garde, one of the functions of which is to limit participation in the upper echelons of theory. Given his sensitivity to the articulation of strategies of distinction across the cultural spectrum, it is surprising that Bourdieu adopts the traditional academic style without reflecting on how it reproduces the exclusions characteristic of bourgeois formalism.

It may be concluded that the three possibilities for systemic intervention implied by

*Distinction*—the development of structural contradictions, the legitimation of dominated-class taste, and the analysis of the sociologist—are each deficient as strategies given the contradictions that accompany them. One might infer from the limited amount of attention they receive that Bourdieu is relatively uninterested in elaborating on these possibilities. For this reason, it may be said that Bourdieu's study exemplifies the "general dearth of real strategic thinking on the Left in advanced countries" of which Perry Anderson complains [27]. This is not to say that these deficiencies of strategy undermine the importance of *Distinction*. Indeed, Bourdieu presents the first general model of the relation of culture to social and material determinants adequately apprehending class as a determining (and determined) force; he analyzes brilliantly the complicity between intellectuals, particularly avant-garde intellectuals, and the economically dominant class; he far surpasses most Marxian theorists in providing a realistic and unpatronizing portrait of the petit-bourgeois and working classes; and he powerfully demonstrates that culture both legitimates social differences and incorporates the economically disempowered into a social system weighted against them. Whatever its deficiencies of strategy, *Distinction* makes available this extraordinary archive of material.

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