

Review

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Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*. Trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. New York: The New Press, 1998. 104 pgs.



When it appeared in France in 1996, Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television* ignited a media controversy that raged for months and propelled the book to the top of the best-seller lists. Bourdieu could not have hoped for a better reception for this short text. Certainly, the controversy surrounding the book boosted Bourdieu's already considerable cultural capital as one of the most prominent figures of the French academy. More significantly, however, the reaction of the print and electronic media to his pointed criticisms served as a confirmation of his conclusions regarding the severe limits of contemporary journalism. The transformation of Bourdieu's book into one of the seemingly endless string of "current events" and "social issues" that grips the media for a moment, only to quickly fade forever into obscurity within a week or so (call this the "*Time* syndrome"), exemplified all of the media's gravest problems in their very attempt to dispute Bourdieu's assessment of their failings.

Though *On Television* presents a very harsh indictment of the media's failure to live up to its democratic promise of informing and educating the populace at large, the strong reaction to Bourdieu's book on the part of the French media establishment is nevertheless somewhat surprising. None of the deficiencies of contemporary journalism that Bourdieu discusses are in and of themselves particularly new or unexpected. Mainstream and

popular media critics have for a long time focused on the issues that Bourdieu raises here: the attention of the media to spectacle, disasters, and human interest stories over more substantive examinations of political and social issues; the media's cynical attention to the "game" of politics as it is played by politicians and lobbyists, as opposed to an exploration of the concrete, material effects of these games; the "invisible censorship" exercised on the news both directly and indirectly by the market--in short, all of the various ways in which journalism imposes limits on the public's vision of what constitutes reality and what correspondingly constitutes politics in this reality. It is perhaps the way in which Bourdieu has related all of these deficiencies to the operation of the 'journalistic field' that has raised the ire not only of the media, but of the French media-intellectuals (Jacques Attali, Luc Ferry, Alain Finkielkraut, Jacques Julliard, etc.) of whom he is especially critical. As in *Homo Academicus*, where Bourdieu worried about the repercussions of divulging the internal secrets of his own academic "tribe", the suggestion that journalistic practice is defined primarily by symbolic struggles internal to the journalistic field--as opposed, for instance, to the desire to accurately depict reality or to promote meaningful public debate--is not the kind of dirty laundry that members of the journalistic tribe are especially interested in having aired in public.

Bourdieu's discussion of the journalistic field here largely mirrors his analysis of other fields of cultural production--for instance, the academic field in *Homo Academicus* and *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, or the field of literary production in *The Rules of Art*. But whereas his analysis of these other fields offered us genuinely new insights into the nature of academic and literary production, it doesn't seem to me that the significance of *On Television* should be assessed primarily by what it contributes to our understanding of journalism. There are, rather, two other aspects of the book that are important to consider for those who are interested in the work of Bourdieu and for those involved in the study of television and the media more generally. First, Bourdieu's analysis of the journalistic field is conducted from the perspective of the changes that television has wrought not only on this field, but on all fields of cultural production. Secondly, this text contains one of Bourdieu's most sustained examination of the relationship between intellectuals and the public, probing in a careful way the responsibilities of intellectuals to their own practices as well as to the larger political and social community to which they belong.

These two aspects of the book are connected by the double-sense in which this text is "on television". It is "on television" insofar as the book deals with the question of television's impact on journalism. It is also quite literally "on television", since the main part of the book originated as a televised lecture that Bourdieu presented on the topic of television. (Appended to the lecture are two essays that were previously published in *Les Actes de la recherche en social science*, "Notes to the Power of Journalism" and "Notes to the Olympics--An Agenda for Analysis".) The performative aspect of the book, which is easily lost in the printed text, is crucial to an understanding of the overall aim of Bourdieu's critique here. By being "on television" in both of these senses, Bourdieu's criticism of television and of journalism more generally occurs at the level of form as well as content. The unprecedented freedom granted to Bourdieu to elaborate his points at length instead of within the compressed frame of a sound bite or a thirty-second "talking

head" interview, to express his views without having to conform to the material and social structures of the journalistic field (in terms of his topic, the level to which the argument is pitched, etc.), and to present his argument without the distraction of multiple camera shots, news graphics and special effects designed to hold the audiences' attention, functions as an implicit critique of the way in which supposedly newsworthy events are normally portrayed. It also raises the issue of how intellectuals should approach the public with their work. "With television", Bourdieu writes, "we are dealing with an instrument that offers, theoretically, the possibility of reaching everybody" (14).

Television thus has a great deal of promise as a tool for the democratic dissemination of information. Of course, it has hardly ever fulfilled this promise: it is instead one of those things in social life that "nobody wants but seem somehow to have been willed" (45).

Bourdieu's analysis suggests the problem with television is structural, and so intellectuals who wish to make use of the power of television to reach the public should do so cautiously, on their own terms as much as possible rather than on the terms that television is increasingly imposing on the entire sphere of culture.

It is clear that Bourdieu believes that this is becoming increasingly difficult. Television becomes in Bourdieu's analysis of the journalistic field a field that dominates other fields. Not only does he argue that television has altered the function of the entire journalistic field, forcing the print media to approximate it more and more in form and content. He also argues that television has profoundly challenged the autonomy of all other fields. "The most important development, and a difficult one to foresee", he writes, "was the extraordinary extension of the power of television over the whole of cultural production, including scientific and artistic production" (36). Television now virtually holds a monopoly on what today constitutes public space, and as such, it controls the access of cultural producers to the public. As with culture, so too with the juridical and political fields. Increasingly, television has the power to determine relevant political issues and to define who count as public figures. This is why political debate so often revolves around minor issues that fit television structurally, but which eliminate a more meaningful discussion of politics (Bourdieu cites the controversy surrounding the wearing of headscarves by the children of North African immigrants in French schools, which finds its equivalent in Canada in the extended debate over the acceptability of mounties wearing turbans), and why pundits and politicians alike strive to be captured in the bright lights of a medium in which mere visibility confers prestige and status. The effects of television on all of these fields--journalism, the cultural fields, the political and juridical fields--originates out of "a contradiction that haunts every sphere of cultural production: the contradiction between the economic and social conditions necessary to produce a certain type of work and the social conditions of transmission for the products obtained under these conditions" (37). This contradiction, Bourdieu suggests, is taken to an extreme in television, a field whose absolute dependence on the economic field in turn places enormous pressures on the relative autonomy of all other fields.

Bourdieu notes that "there is a basic, fundamental contradiction between the conditions that allow one to do cutting-edge math or avant-garde poetry, and so on, and the conditions necessary to transmit these things to everybody else" (37). Part of the effort of this book is thus a defense of the ivory tower. Any argument about the necessary

autonomy of intellectual practices is likely to strike one today as elitist. But as in *Free Exchange*, where he argues for the necessity of continued and unfettered government assistance to the arts, Bourdieu wants to establish that there are greater benefits than costs involved in assuring that intellectual and cultural practices are autonomous with respect to the market, and thus, in a certain sense, with respect to the public. Bourdieu's intention is not to keep the fruits of intellectual and cultural practice away from the public. What he wants to carefully consider, however, are the grounds on which this diffusion of knowledge from the ivory tower to the public takes place in the age of television. What Bourdieu suggests is important above all else is to maintain the crumbling autonomy of each field, to the legitimacy and primacy of that system of authority and awards internal to the intellectual fields, so that the inevitable losers in the struggle over symbolic and cultural capital cannot seek out the *faux* legitimacy offered by television. It is through the symbolic legitimacy that television *has* conferred on intellectuals in France that Bourdieu sees the heteronomy of the market-place flowing into the autonomy of the cultural and intellectual fields, with inevitable consequences both for the fields themselves and for the public dissemination of information. The solution is two-fold. "To escape the twin traps of elitism and demagoguery", Bourdieu writes, "we must work to maintain, even to raise the requirements for the right of entry--the entry fee--into the fields of production, and we must reinforce the duty to get out, to share what we have found, while at the same time improving the conditions and means for doing so" (65). Going "on television" with *On Television* is a project that attempts to do just this.

On Television is a richer text than one might expect given its size and its (for Bourdieu) admirably simple and straightforward writing. In addition to his analysis of journalism and his arguments concerning the necessary autonomy of intellectual practices, it also raises in a new form a number of unresolved questions concerning Bourdieu's work. For example, in her translator's notes Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson suggests that Bourdieu's discussion of the media can easily be extended to the United States (or to other countries) and then all but invalidates this claim by providing lots of reasons to suggest that this wouldn't be such a simple operation. (For example, the clearly delineated ideologies of major newspapers and government support for the media in France is very different than the conditions of media practices in the United States.) How easily Bourdieu's field analysis can be (theoretically) translated to settings other than France, or whether it is bound or limited by a now threatened idea of the nation, remains a question even in the relatively globalized practices of the journalistic field. And then there is Bourdieu's attitude towards popular and mass culture, which is as ambiguous here as it is in his other works. A work like *Distinction* suggests that the objects of bourgeois high culture (especially modernist art, literature and music) have no intrinsic aesthetic merits of their own, but are merely tokens of value in an insidious game of class distinction that transforms bourgeois taste into legitimate taste. Yet Bourdieu is clearly as enamored of high cultural artifacts as Adorno or Lukacs were, reading special significance for example into the work of Flaubert and Manet (the latter having instituted a successful "symbolic revolution" all on his own). This ambiguity is displayed here in his ambivalence towards both the merits of "high" cultural programming as well as the regular junk that makes up so much of TV; neither seems to make full use of the potential of television. So the question becomes: what is it that Bourdieu expects to see on TV?

One hopes that it is not his own style of programming. Bourdieu might see the structure of his television program--no cuts, no time limits, no supporting graphics--as the equivalent of Brechtian theater for the MTV era. But if this is what he believes television should look like, it is hard to imagine that anyone would want to watch Bourdieu on television--not because what he says doesn't have any merit, but for the reasons that when we go to see a film we expect to see more than what would amount to a static, filmed stage-play.

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