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Editorial

Cultural consecration and legitimation—Modes, agents and processes



The intense curiosity within the social sciences for how symbolic value is constructed and how processes of artistic recognition work is fueled by the paradoxical properties of cultural fields. Although the differences in artistic reputations between artists or art works can be tremendous, the process of attribution of artistic quality on which perceptions are based is strongly marked by uncertainty. Put differently, there is no agreement on the defining criteria of artistic value, as no institution has the monopoly to define them. Moreover, artistic works are often seen as “singularities” that are multidimensional, incommensurable, and of uncertain quality (Karpik, 2010). Explaining how differences in artistic reputation emerge has been an important research topic in cultural sociology for decades, because analysing the mechanisms of symbolic production helps us to understand how society values cultural expressions. This special issue of *Poetics* contributes to this strand of research, and, more specifically, offers some new directions with a particular focus on modes, agents and processes of consecration and legitimation.

Importantly, sociological approaches have set themselves against laudatory discourses on artists and artworks. Sociologists have shown time and time again how cultural products are created in a collective process and their value or quality is not intrinsic (Becker, 1982). The true producer of the value and of the meaning of an artwork is not the artist who actually creates it in its materiality, but the entire set of agents engaged in the field whose evaluations together can create symbolic value recognized by the broader community (Bourdieu, 1980). In the short run, this is referred to as “consecration” (discrete events of value assignment, such as winning awards or entering best-of-lists, (see Allen & Lincoln, 2004)), in the long run this can turn into “legitimation” (in which more stable consensus is reached on artistic worth, see Baumann, 2007). Thus, cultural consecration can be characterized by two complementary features: (a) it concerns a high accumulation of symbolic capital, and (b) it implies a distinction between a select group of cultural creators or artworks that are worthy of admiration and the much larger group that is not (Bourdieu, 1991, 1996).

Social scientists often tend to focus on the traditional ways of consecration, studying the role of critics and reviewers (Shrum, 1996; Van Rees, 1983), jury panels (Heinich, 1999), peers (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014), and other individuals or institutions (e.g. museums and academies, see DiMaggio, 1982; Moulin 1992) who – often professionally – engage in the act of making explicit evaluations. Recent transformations of art worlds prompt a more comprehensive view on symbolic production that includes additional modes, agents and processes. Concretely, we observe a growing number of artists (Menger, 2014), the rise of new technologies in promotion and distribution (Beuscart & Couronné, 2009), the globalisation and the international circulation of artists and their artworks (Moulin, 2000; Crane, Kawashima, & Kawasaki, 2002; Sapiro, 2015), the concentration of cultural and media companies, and, broadly speaking, the rise of economic logics and interests (Bouquillion, 2008; Bourdieu, 1999; Chiapello, 1998; Thompson, 2010). As demonstrated, for instance, in Marie-Pierre Pouly’s paper on the consecration of the novel *White Teeth* (this issue), these transformations have not eliminated the traditional ways of consecration. Yet they have spurred the emergence of new forms of recognition (especially linked to new technologies, see Auray & Moreau, 2012; Verboord, 2010), have strengthened those that rely on media visibility and commercial success (Thompson, 2010), and have shifted power relations between agents in the cultural field.

Reporting on studies into various artistic fields (literature, music, photography), the articles collected in this special issue highlight both traditional and new modes of cultural valorization. They share a common viewpoint on consecration by demonstrating an acute awareness that transformations of fields of cultural production can alter the very act of value attribution. As such, each of the papers also sheds new light on the question of how cultural hierarchies are produced.

Whereas many recent studies into consecration (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Cattani et al., 2014; Hicks & Petrova, 2006; Schmutz & Faupel, 2010) combine a quantitative methodology with a strong emphasis on critics and other evaluators, this special issue showcases through different approaches (socio-historic, qualitative, quantitative) how other agents and institutions in the cultural field also shape consecration processes, and, ultimately, impact cultural legitimation. Notwithstanding this overall focus, the papers cover various cultural disciplines and highlight different aspects of symbolic production. The first three papers illuminate the variety in modes of consecration, and provide in-depth analyses of how various agents in a particular field (at a certain time) – be it the literary field or music field – contribute to consecration. The last two papers focus more on the legitimation process, both in the field of popular music, but using very different conceptual tools and methods. Meanwhile the paper by Marco Solaroli bridges consecration and legitimation studies by showing – for the field of photojournalism – how the consecration of a few elite producers can have an impact on the legitimation of a whole genre.

Studying consecration implies analysing who the dominant agents are in a field at a given time that have the legitimacy to select artists and artworks and to evaluate them in socially reputable platforms (English, 2005). Particularly socio-historical studies have the ability to capture the notions of change and flux that are integral to consecration (e.g. Levine, 1988). The first paper in the special issue, by Gisèle Sapiro, offers just that: she provides an analysis of the history of the French literary field through the succession of its modes of consecration and legitimation. She shows how, since the 17th century, different agents and modes of consecration have been involved in the symbolic production of literature. The Académie Française, the societies of authors, the publishers, the literary journals, the literary prizes, the translation and international circulation: various institutions have held the power to consecrate; each in a particular relationship with and degree of autonomy towards the State, the ruling classes, and the market. Importantly, at the end of her paper, she points out how the renewal of consecration modes continues into our current day. Through the case study of Les Correspondances de Manosque, one of the most prestigious festivals of French contemporary literature, she demonstrates how “festivalization” can be viewed as a contemporary mode of consecration.

Although the scopes of the other papers in the special issue do not cover the same long stretches of time, they nonetheless also show how temporal transformations of cultural fields affect the way that cultural value is assigned to cultural producers and products. The paper by Marie-Pierre Pouly studies the production and critical reception of *White Teeth*, the debut novel of British author Zadie Smith that combined large critical acclaim with bestseller list success. Drawing on media analyses and interviews both with persons involved in the publication of the novel and with literary critics, Pouly analyses meticulously the consecration of a ‘quality’ bestseller. In her analysis, she reveals the new logics of literary production that combine profitability and prestige strategies in an increasingly competitive field (Thompson, 2010; Verboord, 2011). The article thus qualifies the historic bipartition of the literary field with its two antithetical logics – symbolic value versus commercial interests – (Bourdieu, 1996) similar to many other studies in cultural sociology in recent years.

The transformations of cultural fields discussed earlier have generated an accrued competition between artists, as a result of which a multiplicity of professional agents and activities has emerged that all serve to stimulate artists' careers (Lizé, Naudier, & Sofio, 2014). Often, the production of fame is the end goal of these new cultural intermediaries. The paper by Wenceslas Lizé examines this development for the music field, focusing on a relatively underestimated type of intermediary: artistic work intermediaries. Relying on both quantitative and qualitative methods, Lizé shows how managers, agents and *tourneurs* in French popular music not only help artists in achieving fame, but also shape consecration. He highlights the resources and strategies exerted by these intermediaries in order to increase the artists' value, especially considering the capital exchanges and conversion they achieve. To this end, he develops a specific use of the concept of symbolic capital that highlights a heuristic scope for the study of social mechanisms of value production in the artistic field. Aiming to “develop artists”, the artistic work intermediaries set up a range of complex strategies, including various forms of promotion, that play on temporality and the mechanics of the economy of musical goods.

The notion of “artist's development” reiterates the fact that access to consecration – whether it concerns artworks, artists or genres – is a dynamic process (Baumann, 2007; De Nooy 2002) dotted with a series of steps (Dubois, 1978; Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006) whose length and complexity vary according to the logics of recognition at work in the artistic field (Bourdieu, 1996; Giuffre, 1999; Lang & Lang, 1988). Marco Solaroli's paper addresses these dynamics in detail in his study of professional photojournalists. Starting from Bourdieu's field theory, he shows how consecration processes aided the transnational expansion of photojournalism. At the same time, consecration is affected by field transformations: innovation in photojournalism was pushed by increased competition among major news magazines as well as the rise of digital technologies and non-professional competitors which forced photographers to distinguish oneself. What his paper also shows is how the logics governing the consecration of artists in particular circumstances can have a profound impact on an entire field, and subsequently allow for the legitimation of a genre.

Whereas many consecration and legitimation studies focus on successes, Karim Hammou's paper interrogates the struggles of a music genre – rap music – to be artistically recognized. Despite the alleged decline of cultural hierarchies, status differences between genres still remain. His case study of the rise of French rap music in the 1990s and early 2000s draws our attention to the influence of industry agents as well as the media and the political fields. Drawing on a large set of media reports and interviews with key informants, Hammou addresses the role of commodification and their various paths (“mainstream paths” “oppositional paths” or “aesthetic paths”) that touch upon individual rap acts, but ultimately also the genre as a whole. Particularly the association of rap with minority groups was important for the first steps toward a legitimation as an art form. However, in the long run, rap music was increasingly viewed as an “othered” cultural good which started to work against its legitimation, though not necessarily against its commercial success.

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