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Beyond distinction: theorising cultural evaluation as a social encounter

*Simone Varriale*¹

This article expands recent attempts to theorise the role of culture's materiality in Pierre Bourdieu's relational epistemology. Drawing on empirical research about the reception of rock and jazz in Italy, and focusing on Italian critics' evaluative practices, the article theorises cultural evaluation as a *social encounter* between social actors' dispositions (i.e. their habitus) and cultural objects' aural, visual and narrative properties. The article argues that such encounters produce *relational* aesthetic experiences, which are neither a property of social actors (e.g. their class) nor of cultural artifacts, but emerge from interactions between the habitus' socio-historical specificity and different cultural materials. This theoretical synthesis, it is argued, can account for meanings and affects which, albeit co-produced by embodied dispositions, are neither reducible to such dispositions nor to practices of distinction. Further, it can account for the *formative power* of aesthetic experiences, i.e. the extent to which they create durable dispositions and attachments.

Keywords: Bourdieu, distinction, habitus, music, materiality

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Introduction

Cultural sociology has gone through profound changes during the last two decades. According to a now canonical narrative (Back et al., 2012: 19-30), studying the institutional arrangements shaping cultural production (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1996) and culture as a means of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) are no longer the kernel of the discipline, as the cultural turn has enhanced a consideration of questions of meaning-making (Alexander and Smith, 2002) and of the autonomy of cultural appreciation from socio-economic determinants. Indeed, sociologists like DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2007), among others, have contributed to a better understanding of aesthetic experiences, exploring the relationship between culture's materiality and people's agency (see also Marshall, 2011; Benzecry and Collins, 2014).

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So far, this is a familiar story. However, other developments have occurred recently which might necessitate a reassessment of this narrative. Although the influence of institutionalist approaches has been tempered, Bourdieu's sociology of culture, particularly *Distinction* (1984), has proved more difficult to question. Recent empirical research has confirmed the long-lasting influence of class and other social differences – like age, gender and ethnicity – on both art appreciation and consumption of popular culture (Bennett et al., 2009). In addition, some scholars have argued that Bourdieu's relational sociology can be expanded to account for aspects of social reality which remain underappreciated in his work, like social interactions (Bottero and Crossley 2011) and culture's technological and material dimension (Prior, 2008; Rimmer, 2012; Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013).

This article further expands this line of theorising. Drawing on Bourdieu's neglected notion of encounter (Bourdieu, 1990: 66-79; 1996: 256-258) it conceptualises cultural evaluation as a *social encounter* between the dispositions of social actors (i.e. their habitus) and the properties of cultural objects. The meanings and affects arising from these encounters are conceptualised as *relational* properties depending on how people's dispositions interact with, and are affected by, cultural materials. The article, then, argues that the notion of social encounter can account for the *formative power* of early aesthetic experiences over later cultural engagements, i.e. the extent to which such experiences create durable dispositions and attachments. This phenomenon has been empirically documented by both Bourdieusian (Rimmer, 2012) and post-Bourdiesian scholarship (Benzecry and Collins, 2014), but it has barely been theorised beyond the epistemological divergences of such approaches. Furthermore, the concept of encounter allows a richer exploration of meanings and attachments which, albeit produced by socio-historically specific dispositions, cannot be *reduced*

to Bourdieu's distinction between highbrow (middle-class) and popular (working class) dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, the article's empirical sections will explore how Italian critics' highbrow disposition was *sensitised* to the different properties of rock and jazz, generating relatively autonomous meanings and musical commitments.

Overall, the article proposes a theoretical synthesis between different traditions of research, one that may be particularly helpful for studying the transnational circulation of cultural forms. Like Schwarz (2013), I take stock of some acquisitions of the 'new' sociology of culture and situate them within a critical framework.

However, while Schwarz focuses on taste performances (or 'techniques'), their stratified nature and stratifying power, I am more concerned with providing a *relational* theory of cultural evaluation, one looking at how dispositions and cultural materials *co-produce* aesthetic experiences and – under certain circumstances – new dispositions.

The next section discusses the scholarly and socio-historical context which justifies this theoretical proposal. I will then provide both an appreciation and critique of post-Bourdieuian cultural sociology, and will draw on some of its insights to better define the concept of *social encounter*. After a methodological discussion, the article's final sections will substantiate my theoretical proposal exploring the reception of Anglo-American rock and jazz among Italian music critics working during the 1970s.

The Persistence of Bourdieu: New Cultural Institutions and Forms of Distinction

This section addresses the main tenets of Bourdieu's sociology of culture and the ways in which it has been recently expanded. This literature, and the socio-historical transformations it points to, tells us why a theory of cultural evaluation more attentive

to culture's materiality should not bracket off people's social histories, particularly the ways in which such histories affect (and are affected by) their aesthetic experiences.

Bourdieu conceptualises social practices as shaped by struggles between groups and organisations endowed with different kinds and amounts of resources (Bourdieu, 1990), which include economic capital, social connections and familiarity with legitimate (highbrow) culture – what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'. Although cultural capital is 'objectified' through the workings of the education system and other institutions – which ascribe artistic value to certain cultural works and genres – it is also a form of embodied knowledge; a 'disposition' which social actors acquire via family background and education (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). It is through the concept of 'habitus' that Bourdieu conceptualises the enduring influence of early social experiences upon people's perspectives and behaviour. The habitus is a set of bodily and cognitive dispositions which social actors develop via early life experiences and through which they make sense of the social fields (Bourdieu, 1996) they engage with. Given Bourdieu's emphasis on unequal distribution of capitals, his theory frames art appreciation as shaped by class inequalities and struggles for recognition (Bourdieu, 1996). Cultural practices, then, reproduce asymmetries of power which affect society at large.

Although this position is based on specific empirical studies, Bourdieu's aim was to develop a theoretical model to be refined through further empirical research (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In recent years, several scholars have confirmed some of Bourdieu's theoretical premises, but they have also refined his understanding of cultural participation. While Bourdieu's work had focused on high culture, these studies show that popular culture has become the new field (Bourdieu, 1996) in which

the socially privileged invest their embodied cultural capital (Holt, 1997; Friedman, 2011; Lizardo and Skiles, 2012). Moreover, appreciation of high culture, like classical music, still depends on early familiarisation with its canons and conventions, i.e. ‘inherited’ cultural capital (Bennett et al., 2009; Atkinson, 2011). This literature has focused on the changing taste of the upper and middle classes. Other scholars, then, have considered the historical and institutional conditions which make new forms of distinction possible in the first place. Several studies have explored the rise of cultural criticism across different fields of popular culture, like film (Baumann, 2001), popular music (van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010; Varriale, 2014a) and television (Bielby et al., 2005). They have showed that critics writing for broadsheets and specialised magazines have progressively imposed a ‘highbrow perspective’ upon popular culture, i.e. they have evaluated popular genres according to criteria like originality, seriousness and complexity. Critics have thus contributed to the making of new hierarchies and historical canons, but also to new forms of social exclusion, for example favouring male musicians and all male acts in their coverage choices (Schmutz 2009).

These two literatures problematise Bourdieu’s outdated understanding of popular culture as an undifferentiated working class culture (1984), but they also show that social differences remain key to an understanding of everyday cultural engagements and the institutional context in which they take place. Both research strands, however, have rarely engaged with questions of materiality and pleasure. Drawing on Bourdieu’s distinction between highbrow and popular criteria of appreciation (1984),¹ research on critics has focused on the quantitative measurement of such criteria in critical discourse (e.g. Baumann, 2001; van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010), hence ignoring how critics’ dispositions interact with different genres and cultural materials.

On the other hand, scholarship on new forms of distinction has provided rich qualitative accounts of people's cultural choices, and has explored more ambiguous dimensions of cultural participation, like the uneasy relationship that migrants (Bennett et al., 2009) and socially mobile respondents (Friedman, 2011) entertain with legitimate culture. However, focusing on boundary-drawing (Lamont and Molnàr, 2002) this literature has addressed only occasionally the extent to which social actors are moved by cultural materials, and the ways in which they ground their understandings of cultural value in such aesthetic experiences.² To be sure, cultural materials have recently been considered by Rimmer (2012) and Dominguez Rubio and Silva (2013). The latter have investigated how contemporary art, with its unconventional materials and media-based performances, imposes new dynamics of competition-collaboration in art institutions, thus challenging the enduring 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1996) of the artist as a single creator. Focusing on music consumption, Rimmer (2012) has explored how early exposition to certain music styles and sonic structures generates a distinctive 'musical habitus', i.e. durable dispositions affecting later musical preferences. However, while recognising the role of materiality in co-producing cultural practices, these contributions focus on boundary-drawing practices (Rimmer) and field struggles (Dominguez Rubio and Silva). My contention, then, is that dispositions generate meanings and attachments which are not *reducible* to such practices, and which require a broader theoretical synthesis to be fully understood. In the article's empirical sections, I will show how the encounter between Italian music critics and Anglo-American rock and jazz produced meanings that it would be difficult to understand without taking into account the different properties of such musics. Before turning to these questions, the next section draws on recent cultural

sociology to better define culture's material dimension and situate it within a Bourdieu-inspired relational epistemology.

Challenging Bourdieu

Several scholars have contended that Bourdieusian theory, with its focus on struggles for power and recognition, is badly equipped to understand cultural participation as an emotional and expressive experience (Crossley and Bottero, 2014; Benzecry and Collins, 2014), and have explored in greater detail the relationship between aesthetic power, agency and identity. This debate has focused on the case of music, but the proposals of music sociologists have found larger echo in the 'new sociology of art' (De La Fuente, 2010) and American cultural sociology (McCormick, 2009). I focus my own discussion on music because my theoretical proposal is based on an empirical case of musical evaluation, and because music sociology is arguably the field which has proposed the most sophisticated theories of culture's materiality.

Scholars like Frith (1998), DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2007) have all stressed the importance of music's sonic properties and emotional force. Moreover, DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2007) have pointed to the *dialectical nature* of cultural engagements, arguing that the meanings which people attach to music are the result of a co-production involving both listeners and the properties of musical pieces. In this respect, DeNora (2000: 40-44) has proposed the notion of 'affordances' to identify the possibilities that musical pieces provide listeners for semiotic and emotional work. From this standpoint, music's lyrics and sonic structures – e.g. rhythm, melody and harmony – can be used in a variety of everyday practices: music is a 'technology of self' used to cope with emotions and memories, which structures mundane rituals like waking up and going to work (DeNora, 2000).

These theories have questioned a purely constructionist understanding of cultural materials, namely what DeNora refers to as: ‘a preoccupation with “what” people think about particular cultural works’, rather than with: ‘what culture “does” for its consumers within the contexts of their lives’ (DeNora 2000: 6). Indeed, for music sociologists both culture’s materiality and the symbolic classifications in which it is inscribed – i.e. attributions of genre and historical canons – are relatively autonomous from the interpretations of social actors (Born, 2005). However, despite widening sociology’s cultural agenda, these theories have bracketed off the social differentiation of cultural publics and the asymmetries of power in which music listening is embedded. In this respect, Prior (2011: 134) has argued that such approaches may lead to a form of ‘micro-aestheticism’, as their language risks being indistinguishable from people’s language of aesthetic contemplation. Indeed, while DeNora frames music’s uses as depending on the constraints of different social settings (DeNora, 2000: 38-39), her theoretical framework does not take into account the social differences and the broader field of relationships (Bourdieu, 1990) which shape listeners’ biographies, and which may inform how they engage with cultural materials. Similarly, while Hennion has been keen on stressing that cultural materials need reflexive actors to be activated, the social history of such actors is black-boxed in his approach (Hennion 2007).

Taking such limitations into account, the next section draws on this literature to consider the role that cultural materials may play in Bourdieu’s relational epistemology. Despite seeming an unlikely marriage, this integration is made possible by the relational theorising of both DeNora and Hennion. Since they conceptualise musical meaning as a co-production requiring the intervention of social actors, we may start considering such actors as endowed with diverse histories and trajectories.

DeNora herself acknowledges that: ‘non-musical materials, such as situations, biographical matters, patterns of attention, assumptions, are all implicated in the clarification of music’s semiotic force’ (2000: 45). Such references reveal the productive role of Bourdieu’s habitus for a better understanding of aesthetic experiences. The unlikely marriage thus becomes a promising one, as Bourdieu’s sophisticated conception of social actors may improve our understanding of how cultural materials – interacting with people’s dispositions – contribute to *relational* aesthetic experiences.

Cultural Evaluation as a Social Encounter

To theorise the interaction between embodied dispositions and cultural materials, I expand Bourdieu’s suggestion that social practices arise from the meeting, or *encounter*, between two histories, namely the history of social actors and the history of the ‘fields’ they engage with, i.e. enduring structures of social relations, which are organised around common practices, stakes and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1990: 66-79; 1996: 256-258). Both actors and fields are products (in constant making) of autonomous histories. Bourdieu specifies that culture’s symbolic properties – genre distinctions and historical canons – are part of a field’s collective history; its ‘space of possibles’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 193-205). Participation into a cultural field thus depends on understanding of this history, its categories and objects, as the field’s newcomer cannot help but engaging with this pre-existing structure.

The problem with this conceptualisation is that it stresses the *harmony* between people’s dispositions and the ‘rules of art’ (Bourdieu, 1996). However, there are a number of situations which problematise this harmony. As Bourdieu himself acknowledges, there may be cases of ‘misfit’ between people’s habitus and the doxa

of existing fields (Bourdieu 1996: 256). For that reason, some cultural encounters may be accidental, occasional or take place without a perfect understanding of the categories/histories in which a cultural object is inscribed. Further, Bourdieu seems to suggest that the properly trained habitus simply imposes a highbrow perspective upon an inert object of contemplation (Bourdieu 1996: 320). Culture's material features – from general differences between poetry and music, to specific differences between jazz and rock – do not seem to interfere with the habitus's operations. However, if we follow DeNora's suggestion (2000), culture is endowed with a material dimension, which in the case of music includes distinctive sonic properties. As I will show in the article's empirical sections, we can consider musicians' image, history and social identity as part of the 'affordances' of popular music genres. Indeed, such musics are *mediated* cultural commodities, which rely on images and narratives – and on various technological supports – for their circulation (Shuker, 1994). We can thus explore how the dispositions of social actors are *moved by* such aural, visual and narrative properties. There is no need to assume that encounters with cultural artifacts are reducible to the dispositions which orchestrate them, nor do we need to assume a perfectly trained habitus. Whilst there is strong empirical evidence that embodied, classed dispositions are transferable across cultural fields (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012), I argue that they produce relatively autonomous meanings and experiences, which arise from the *interactions* between the habitus and the cultural materials it engages with (table 1).³

TABLE 1

To be sure, while this theoretical synthesis draws on a case of musical evaluation, I am not prioritising sound as the primary element implicated in musical encounters. This is justified by the mediated nature of popular music genres and, as I show below, by Italian critics' fascination for the visual dimension of rock and jazz. Indeed, ascribing analytical primacy to music's sonic structures risks downplaying the complexity and historical specificity of aesthetic encounters. And too much emphasis on 'the music itself' could reproduce a sociological version of the Kantian aesthetic (Bourdieu 1984), one which normatively assumes the 'sonic purity' of musical encounters. By contrast, I propose a more inclusive conceptualisation of music's materiality, one arguably more attuned to the imprecise, 'impure' ways in which social actors make sense of various musical and (by extension) cultural forms.

As showed by table 1, the notion of social encounter demands also appreciation of the changing trajectories of both actors and cultural objects. Bourdieu's notion of trajectory emphasises the historical nature of people's habitus, their position in a variety of social/cultural fields and (potentially) their changing position within the social space, i.e. changes in composition and volume of their capitals (Bourdieu, 1984: 109-112). Furthermore, if we take into account the spatial/temporal trajectory of cultural objects (Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013), including the global spread of contemporary popular culture (Regev, 2013), it becomes difficult to maintain the case of a perfect harmony between habitus and field. The empirical case I explore below shows that such a harmony had to be *created*. Expanding a growing literature on the global circulation of Anglo-American popular culture (Regev, 2013; Prieur and Savage, 2013), the article's empirical sections show that Italian music critics working in the 1970s had to sensitise their habitus (one trained via secondary and higher education) to the properties of musics, like rock and jazz, which had been introduced

only recently in the Italian context. The discovery of such musics, then, produced distinctive meanings and attachments. Moreover, rock music had a *formative power* on critics' habitus, as it created an enduring attachment for what they understood, as soon as the early-1970s, as the 'canon' of 1960s rock. The encounter between rock and Italian critics, then, created a new cultural tradition for this cohort of young Italians, one that exerted considerable power over their evaluations (see below).

Evidence from Italy: Outline of the Research

The next sections substantiate the theoretical proposal hitherto discussed via empirical exploration. I will draw on my research on the emergence of popular music criticism as a new cultural field in Italy. This project is concerned with the ways in which recently imported music genres, like rock, jazz and soul, were received by Italian young people working as critics for specialised music magazines. It addresses the impact of globalisation upon a 'periphery' of the field of pop-rock music (Regev, 2013), as Italy has been mostly an importer of Anglo-American music trends since the late 1950s (De Luigi, 1982). In line with field theory (Bourdieu, 1996), the research provides a social history of the music press and a thick description of critics' narratives. It is through the latter that the project sheds some light on how critics anchored new distinctions in the properties (and pleasures) of rock and jazz.

I focused on 1970s Italy because this socio-historical context made it possible to explore the emergence of new cultural distinctions in Italian society (see also Santoro 2010) and how they were justified by critics. As I show in my discussion of jazz, this context is also distinctive for its high degree of politicisation (Ginsborg 1990). The position of some magazines (the monthlies *Muzak* and *Gong*) within a broader political network (the so-called *movimento*) significantly affected critics' evaluations.

However, this doesn't preclude the possibility of proposing a more general theory of cultural evaluation. Indeed this context is particularly productive to explore how social actors' position in other fields may shape their aesthetic encounters. And the music press's partial politicisation facilitates an exploration of field differences, i.e. how critics' editorial affiliation shaped their encounters. Further, this context makes the co-producing role of cultural materials particularly evident, as critics were precisely trying to make sense of new, recently imported musical styles. Overall, following Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), I 'sensitised' field theory to the peculiarities of my case study, which allowed me to revise some of the theory's epistemological premises.

Methodologically, the research is based on archival research. It employs music magazines as primary data and several historical sources. Through the latter I collected data about the age, education, gender and class of 34 critics working for magazines which occupied different positions in the field of music criticism: the weekly *Ciao 2001* and the monthlies *Muzak* and *Gong* (whose differences I discuss below). Working on complete archival collections, I analysed samples of three editorial formats: music features (297), editorials (192) and readers' letters (487). The following discussion focuses on music features, whose sample is both purposive and theory-driven.⁴ I used discourse analysis to inductively reconstruct the meanings that critics ascribed to different musics. In line with Bourdieu (1990), I conceptualise music writing as a 'practice' through which critics put their dispositions in use and mobilise their resources. For reasons of space, the next sections will not provide a complete history and field analysis of Italian music journalism (Varriale, 2014b). Nonetheless, I will provide relevant data about critics' social trajectory and position in the music press. For similar reasons, I will not provide a full exploration of critics'

encounter with rock and jazz, but some demonstrative examples of how they made sense of the aesthetic differences between (and within) these genres. All excerpts have been translated by me.

A Formative Experience: the Encounter with British and American Rock

In line with other studies on new forms of distinction (Baumann, 2001; van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010; Lizardo and Skiles, 2012), my research shows that Italian critics applied a highbrow disposition to music genres like rock and jazz. They evaluated the artistic originality of songs and albums vis-à-vis the past of these traditions and assessing the autonomy of musicians from market constraints (Varriale, 2014b). This is by no means surprising. As revealed by their biographies, Italian critics working in the 1970s were highly educated young people, predominantly male⁵ and likely to come from an upper and middle class background (table 2). Their class background is revealed both by some biographies (7) and by the number of people who completed *liceo* (i.e. humanities and science-based high school). During the 1950s and 1960s, these schools recruited predominantly from upper and middle class families: graduates with a working class background were 7.57% in 1952-53, they were still only 11.03% in 1969-70 (Barbagli, 1974: 373-381).⁶ Indeed, despite the growth in young people's access to secondary and higher education during the 1960s, the Italian education system remained significantly classed (Ginsborg, 1990: 298-347; Cavalli and Leccardi, 1997).

TABLE 2

However, the analysis of critics' articles show that their experience of popular music cannot be reduced to the imposition of highbrow categories. On the one hand, they had to *tune* their habitus into the properties of different genres, like rock and jazz, and sub-genres like glam rock and free jazz (see below). On the other hand, their habitus had been shaped by an early aesthetic encounter: the discovery of Anglo-American rock between the middle and late 1960s. Being born, for the most part, between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, Italian critics discovered rock as teenagers. Their memories of such discovery reveal the workings of a habitus shaped by the collective trajectory summarised in table 2, but also elements of aesthetic surprise, fascination and pleasure.

For us, in an Italy where the football match was the best you could get as mass culture, the arrival of the Beatles was like a thunderbolt. We were just teenagers torn between the oratory, sport, school and repressed sexual desires. More than an explosion, the Beatles were like awakening after a very long sleep. [...] We were fascinated by this music, but also by the possibility of distinguishing ourselves from the masses. We were fascinated by this community, which, somehow, we dreamed to join.⁷

Other articles published in the 1970s look back to similar moments of musical discovery. These narratives show the extent to which critics' experience of rock was a *social encounter*. It was the encounter between a group of young people endowed with significant cultural capital and foreign music providing new materials for symbolic and emotional work. These materials were not purely sonic, but also visual and narrative. They included musicians' public image and the media narratives through which they were introduced in Italy. Indeed, the Beatles were an emotional 'thunderbolt' precisely because, as a *mediated* cultural commodity, they could evoke

a new social world (a ‘community’ that critics, as teenagers, ‘dreamed to join’). This is precisely what DeNora (2000) defines as music’s affordances. However, the excerpt shows also that critics’ social trajectory is crucial for a full understanding of their encounter with these cultural materials. Their aesthetic fascination for rock was grounded in their experience of national institutions (the school, the church) and popular culture (the football match). Further, words like ‘mass culture’ (*cultura di massa*), and the desire of distinction from ‘the masses’ expressed by the excerpt, reveal the influence of education and social privilege. Rock music was thus an emotional and cognitive resource which critics could use to make sense of their social environment and their own position within its institutions. The following excerpt, which describes the encounter with Frank Zappa’s music and image, shows a similar process.

An odd gentleman seated on a toilet; with a funny moustache and a laughable name [...]. We were in the middle of the 1968, and the seated-on-a-toilet Zappa gave us the subtle emotion of the baby saying “poo” to the priest-uncle. That vulgarity became a positive value; a way to construct and affirm an identity denied by a patriarchal and liberal-repressive family.⁸

As in the former example, new cultural materials – the image of Frank Zappa ‘seated on a toilet’ – resonate with the writer’s habitus and social experience, generating a ‘subtle emotion’. While both excerpts reveal the cultural capital of Italian critics, the excitement and emotional intensity activated by these encounters cannot be reduced to the application of a highbrow disposition. Both excerpts show the extent to which the making of new distinctions was sustained by emotional participation into a

community, one that was both real (a community of peers) and imagined, as it was evoked by the image of pop-rock acts like the Beatles and Zappa.

As anticipated above, the encounter with rock shaped critics' disposition towards later music trends. Their experience of 1960s rock became a yardstick of evaluation for subsequent encounters with different acts and styles, like glam rock and punk. The following article describes the music of David Bowie and Gary Glitter as similarly characterised by: 'easy and rhythmic [sounds], which are very close to the emotional simplicity of rock "n" roll'. However, these sounds are evaluated in light of what critics, in the 1970s, already regarded (and defended) as a tradition (Varriale, 2014b). A sharp distinction could then be made between the music of Bowie and Glitter.

Bowie is the true inheritor of a genuinely rock tradition with a specific cultural background – a music that was born with the Rolling Stones and has further evolved with Bob Dylan and Velvet Underground [...]. Glitter and the likes, on the contrary, have nothing behind their shoulders. [...] Their heavy and unoriginal music is a purely epidermic fact; one which is consciously manufactured to please the youngest people.⁹

Here, as in the following example, music's sonic properties resonate with a habitus shaped by early aesthetic encounters with the 'founding fathers' (e.g. Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones) of Anglo-American rock.

Patti Smith is a product of the latest generation of American pop musicians [...]. Her art, today, is no longer urgent and original poetry (as one of the Founding Fathers). It can only be an intellectual game. *The sonic texture is indeed the most disconcerting aspect of her music.* *Horses* [Smith's first album] sounds like a record of the 1960s, *it reminds us*

*of the years before Woodstock, the heroic years of the beat, a familiar movie with Velvet [Underground], [Jim] Morrison and Dylan's Maggie's Farm.*¹⁰ [my emphasis]

While highbrow categories – originality and autonomy from market pressures – are clearly at work in these examples, the authors' evaluation does not depend only on familiarity with such categories, but on their early socialisation into the sounds, images and narratives of rock – i.e. what makes Patti Smith's 'sonic texture' a 'familiar movie'. Indeed, my findings show some similarity with the study of opera amateurs conducted by Claudio Benzecry in Buenos Aires (Benzecry and Collins, 2014). As Italian critics, opera amateurs evaluate new performances vis-à-vis early, formative aesthetic experiences.

For an opera fanatic hearing a live performance, the experience is a combination of listening to the actual voice of the singer while also listening to it inside one's own head, surrounded by internalized memories and standards created by previous hearings (Benzecry and Collins, 2014: 312)

Both aesthetic pleasure and evaluation, then, result from ongoing practice; one that leaves its marks on amateurs' bodies and memories. This is precisely what happened to Italian critics: ongoing socialisation into the sounds, images and narratives of rock created a new attachment and evaluative standard, i.e. a durable disposition towards later musical encounters. While Benzecry and Collins draw on the latter's theory of Interaction Ritual Chains (Collins 2004), and do not engage with the notion of habitus, their work provides further support to a relational theory of cultural evaluation – one that focuses on the interactions between social actors and cultural materials, but without *reducing* aesthetic encounters to either social or cultural

determinants. As I show in the next section, the concept of social encounter can also account for the position of social actors in the cultural field and other social fields.

Race as an Aesthetic Experience: the Encounter with Jazz

As showed by the previous section, critics could justify rock's artistic value making reference to its sonic and visual properties (and the power of such properties over their social experience). Something similar can be observed in the case of critics' encounter with jazz. However, since jazz had different properties than rock (i.e. different sonic structures, images and histories), its cultural value was grounded in a different aesthetic experience. In this section, I show that critics' evaluation of jazz depended on a racial fascination for African-American musicians. Moreover, their stance towards jazz reveals a further dimension of social encounters, namely field differences. Since cultural producers, critics and their audience occupy different positions in the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1996), these differences may inform how they engage with cultural objects and evaluate their properties. The 1970s Italian music press was a significantly diversified sub-field: it included magazines advocating different ideological projects and having different degrees of market success. Critics' evaluation of jazz was thus strongly shaped by their affiliation with different magazines. Here I explore in more detail the differences between the weekly *Ciao 2001* and the monthlies *Gong* and *Muzak*. The latter were publications possessing a high degree of symbolic capital among Italian young people, but lower economic capital in comparison to *Ciao 2001* – the publication which, between the early 1970s and early 1980s, held the highest circulation figures among specialised music magazines (Varriale, 2015).

Jazz critics writing on *Gong* and *Muzak* focused mostly on free jazz, whereas *Ciao 2001* had a more diverse and inclusive coverage. More importantly, when the monthlies addressed African-American musicians, they evaluated both their music and racial identity. Indeed, their articles reveal a strong aesthetic fascination for black bodies, one that ascribed a distinctively political meaning to free jazz. From this standpoint, Albert Ayler's music could be seen as reflecting a deeper African American 'spirituality' charged with political (as well as sexual) meanings:

[Ayler's *Truth is Marching In* is] an explosive and enthralling piece based on the memory of New Orleans fanfares and the orgiastic frenzy of African American pre-jazz music.

[...]

As always, African American people's spirituality is infused with sexuality, ancestral mythologies, visionary capacities, magic. But most importantly, this spirituality is a religion of the real. It is love for men and their destiny. As a result, it becomes the will of change.¹¹

Free jazz, then, was taken to represent, without any mediation, the culture of a whole social group ('African American people's spirituality'). This politicisation of free jazz (and black culture) was shaped by critics' editorial and political affiliation. Indeed, the monthlies were part of a broader network of political movements – the so-called *movimento* – which emerged in Italy during the 1970s (Ginsborg, 1990). *Gong* and *Muzak* were presented (i.e. positioned) by their editorial boards as projects *for* the movement, ones devoted to a serious reflection about the relationships between aesthetics and politics. This led to a distinctive valorisation of black culture, one that emphasised both its aesthetic and political disruptiveness.

Critics writing for the monthlies could thus connect free jazz's aesthetic radicalism to a similarly 'radical' social identity.

When [Sam Rivers] plays with energetic irrationality, we get back the ghosts of the black rage and sensuality; the blood and not just the colour of an archaic origin.¹²

[Jeanne Lee] combines female expressivity, black culture and improvised music, that is, things and situations which disrupt and perturb the bourgeois morality [...]. *This is a universe of witches, savages and drifters, which has nothing to do with aesthetic clichés.*¹³ [my emphasis]

These examples show the extent to which free jazz's sonic and visual properties – the latter including musicians' image and social identity – informed critics' evaluations. Such properties resonated with critics' political commitment and highly intellectual view of popular culture, i.e. dispositions depending on their social trajectory and position in both the cultural and political field. By contrast, the critic managing the jazz pages of *Ciao 2001* (Dario Salvatori) did not ascribe the same political value to free jazz, and his reviews displayed little fascination for black bodies. While a highbrow disposition was clearly at work in his reviews, a political reading of free jazz was openly criticised.

Unfortunately, [Archie] Shepp's performance in Bergamo has proven that a certain kind of music, beyond its political content and African tunics, has not much to offer. [...] The musicians on stage appeared completely lost and without inspiration.¹⁴

Ciao 2001 rarely supported an open politicisation of music production and consumption. Without rejecting political engagement per se, the magazine adopted a more detached attitude towards the counter-cultural and left-wing ferments of the Italian *movimento*. This editorial position – a heteronomous one in Bourdieu’s term (1996) – aimed to maximise the magazine’s impact upon a socially diverse young audience, one including people from different social and political backgrounds (Varriale, 2014b). Critics’ editorial affiliation and position in other social fields, then, were as significant as their highbrow disposition in shaping their encounter with jazz.

Conclusion

In the last two sections, I have showed that the notion of social encounter may enable a more comprehensive exploration of evaluative practices and aesthetic experiences, one that focuses on a) how the habitus is put to work vis-à-vis different sonic, visual and narrative properties, and b) the extent to which aesthetic encounters create enduring dispositions and attachments. More generally, this article has proposed a revised theory of cultural evaluation, one bridging Bourdieu’s focus on social trajectories with the attention of post-Bourdieuian scholarship for culture’s materiality. While these perspectives have been usually understood as irreconcilable, I have argued that this is not necessarily the case. Expanding a Bourdieusian take on cultural materials (Rimmer, 2012; Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013), I have argued that the power of such materials over social actors should be studied taking into account *who* these actors are, i.e. their trajectories and degree of engagement (or position) within existing social fields. This approach may be beneficial to post-Bourdieuian scholars concerned with the study of aesthetic experiences (e.g. De La Fuente, 2010), as such experiences are likely to be shaped by social differences, new

forms of cultural authority and global asymmetries of power (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012; Regev, 2013). Although cultural sociologists have acknowledged that aesthetic objects need human actors to be ‘activated’ (DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2007), a closer attention to the histories of such actors may provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms which orchestrate aesthetic experiences. On the other hand, I have argued that a closer inspection of people’s engagement with cultural materials may reveal meanings and attachments which are not reducible to practices of distinction. Despite paying more attention to cultural materials than in the past, the Bourdieusian literature has tended to see boundary-drawing as the most, if not the only, relevant dimension of cultural participation. In the last two sections, I have showed that although critics’ highbrow disposition played a key role in their encounters with rock and jazz, the meanings emerging from such encounters are not reducible to their habitus. Studying such meanings, then, can improve our understanding of people’s aesthetic experiences and conceptions of cultural value.

Although this article has focused on a particular national and historical context, the approach proposed here can be applied to different contexts and cultural genres, like film, television, video games and the subtler distinctions which animate these fields. Further work on different fields may also refine the conceptualisation of cultural materials proposed here. Indeed, my classification – which distinguishes between sonic, visual and narrative properties – has inductively emerged from the analysis of popular music styles, but it might need to be sensitised to the properties of different cultural forms. Adoption of different methodologies, like ethnography, may also reveal the importance of properties which are inevitably lost in archival-based research (e.g. tactile and olfactory properties). Further, while I have focused on

critics' evaluative practices, it is possible to apply the concept of social encounter to other forms of cultural participation as well as other social groups.

From a theoretical point of view, the approach proposed here may contribute to further developing a post-Bourdieuian relational sociology (Crossley, 2011). Indeed, I have argued that the meanings generated by social encounters are *relational properties* emerging from the interactions between people's dispositions and different cultural materials. Such interactions, as clarified by table 1, are endowed with semi-autonomous properties, i.e. meanings and attachments which cannot be reduced to the properties of either social actors or cultural objects. A focus on encounters, then, may fully reveal the role of music (and other cultural forms) as an emotional and cognitive resource, one that does not simply work as an exchange capital (Bourdieu, 1984). It is significant that Italian critics, who were clearly 'investing' their cultural capital in the field of popular music, could none the less write about other dimensions of their encounters, like the sense of collective participation enhanced by the discovery of rock, and the fascination – a racialised one – for the struggle of African-American musicians within the US context. The notion of encounter, then, can bring relational sociology beyond an examination of capitals' conversion and maximisation. However, it can do so without losing sight of people's social histories and their role in the generation of aesthetic experiences. Although Bourdieu has been repeatedly accused of focusing on power and prestige as the only meaningful dimensions of social action (McCormick, 2009; Born, 2010; Crossley and Bottero, 2014), cultural sociologists have too easily equated social differences (i.e. the properties of social actors) with these questions. I hope to have showed that social differences might be important precisely to better understand the pleasures and meanings of cultural participation.

Notes

1. In contrast to the highbrow disposition, Bourdieu (1984) defines the working classes' popular taste as a 'taste of necessity', one praising the realism and emotional impact of cultural works.
2. For instance, see respondents' references to the 'energy' and 'intensity' of contemporary popular music in Bennett et al. (2009: 75-93).
3. In line with existing research, the model assumes that knowledge of aesthetic values/canons depends on education, class background and degree of engagement (i.e. position) in other cultural fields. Aesthetic value is thus *not* an intrinsic property of cultural materials, as it depends on how embodied dispositions *react* to different materials.
4. I sampled articles about pop-rock (168), jazz (67), soul-disco (25) and folk (47), as these were the categories used by Italian critics. I focused on four different genres to explore how their different properties – including, when relevant, their internal differences – shaped critics' evaluations. I sampled articles until I reached analytical 'saturation', i.e. when distinctive trends had fully emerged.
5. Examples analysed in this article are all written by male critics. Elsewhere (Varriale 2014b) I provide a full analysis of how gender shaped critics' aesthetic encounters.
6. I use 'upper' and 'middle class' following Barbagli's historical study of the Italian education system (1974). Given their successful transition through *licei* and university, critics' were less likely to be children of 'dependent workers' (e.g. factory and rural workers) and more likely to be children of 'autonomous workers' (e.g. professionals and entrepreneurs). While this distinction doesn't take into account dependent workers with high cultural capital (teachers, civil servants), it is

sufficiently robust to reveal the structural exclusion of working class children from the elitist culture of *licei* (see also Ginsborg 1990).

7. Ricci, P. M. (1974) 'Beatles', *Muzak*, n. 12 (October), p. 26.
8. Pintor, G. (1975) 'C'è un signore seduto sul cesso coi baffi', *Muzak*, n. 4 (July), pp. 39-40.
9. Insolera, M. (1974) 'Gary Glitter', *Ciao 2001*, n. 9 (March), pp. 52-54.
10. Bertoncelli, R. (1976) 'Patty in Excelsis', *Gong*, n. 7-8 (July-August), pp. 54-56.
11. Castaldo, G. (1975) 'Zio Tom, Zio Sam, Zio Sax', *Muzak*, n. 3 (June), pp. 34-36.
12. Delconte, P. 1976 'Riflessi sul nuovo mito Sam Rivers', *Gong*, n. 10 (October), pp. 12-13.
13. Bolelli, F. (1976) 'Jeanne Lee. Una voce, un corpo', *Gong*, n. 6 (June), pp. 25-27.
14. Salvatori, D. (1974) 'Bergamo. L'Art Ensemble non salva il jazz', *Ciao 2001*, n. 14 (April), pp. 12-15.

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Social Actor →	Encounter	← Cultural Object
<p><u>Properties</u> Embodied dispositions</p> <p>↑</p> <p>Position in social/cultural fields (i.e. class background, education, age, gender, nationality, occupation, consumption)</p> <p>↑</p> <p>Social trajectory</p>	<p><u>Properties</u> Meanings/Affects</p>	<p><u>Properties</u> Materials (sonic, visual, narrative)</p> <p>↑</p> <p>Technological mediation (e.g. vinyl, CD, Internet)</p> <p>↑</p> <p>Spatial/temporal trajectory</p>

Table 1. Theoretical synthesis

Date of Birth	1950-1957: 16 1945-1949: 6 1942-1944: 3 1938: 1 1933: 1 No mention to date of birth: 7
Education	<u>Diploma (secondary school): 17*</u> - <i>liceo</i> : 15 - non-specified or other: 2 <u>Laurea (degree): 12</u> - (7 mention <i>liceo</i> as secondary school) No mention to education: 5
Gender	Men: 26 Women: 8**
* Figure includes university drop-outs (1) and people who do not specify if attendance led to a degree (4). ** Only 3 women wrote regularly about music.	

Table 2. Critics writing for *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong* (1973-1977)