

International conference “Bourdieu, Work and Inequalities” to be held between 16 and 18 November 2022 at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers (CNAM) in Paris

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Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic domination and the controversy between modernism and postmodernism in architecture

This paper aims to explain why Pierre Bourdieu’s “Le marché des biens symboliques” is useful for deconstructing the solidity of the various architects’ positions in relation to their ideological, political, aesthetic, marketing, and academic ambitions. To grasp how symbolic domination affects their ambitions, it suffices to bring to mind Bourdieu’s remark that “[s]ymbolic domination . . . is something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that it is very difficult” (Bourdieu cited in Grenfell 2014, p. 192). In “Le marché des biens symboliques”, Bourdieu highlights that “[t]he field of production and circulation of symbolic goods is defined as the system of objective relations between different instances characterized by the function they fulfill in the division of labor of production, reproduction and distribution of symbolic goods” (Bourdieu 1971, p. 54). The paper will place particular emphasis on the reasons for which Bourdieu’s reflections, in “Le marché des biens symboliques”, are pivotal for grasping how the understanding of the controversy between modernism and postmodernism in architecture was conceived by the architects and architecture critics, theorists, and historians “are mediated by the structure of the field” and “depend on the position occupied by the category in question within the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 24) Bourdieu also argues that “[a]ll relations among agents and institutions of diffusion or consecration are mediated by the field’s structure” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 25), drawing a distinction between subjective and social representation. Another distinction that is at the centre of Bourdieu’s thought is that between the “field of restricted production” and the “field of large-scale cultural production” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 17). According to Bourdieu, the former is “measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 5).

To understand how the interrelation between architecture and its economic, political, and social context evolves, it is useful to take into consideration Bourdieu’s position claiming that “the more cultural producers form a closed field of competition for cultural legitimacy, the more the internal demarcations appear irreducible to any external factors of economic, political or social differentiation” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 5). A case in which it becomes evident how Pierre Bourdieu’s approach is useful for understanding the diverse interpretations of the tension between modernism and postmodernism is the comparison between *La modernité, un projet inachevé: 40 architectures*, which was curated by Paul Chemetov and Jean-Claude Garcias, and *La modernité ou l’esprit du temps*, which was curated by Jean Nouvel, Patrice Goulet, and François Barré (Charitonidou 2015). Following Bourdieu, the paper argues that the ways in which the curators of the aforementioned exhibitions perceive the image and role of architecture reflect their respective positions within the social field. In this sense, the exhibitions could be understood as mechanisms or tactics aiming to conquer symbolic capital.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, cultural legitimacy, social field, symbolic capital, postmodernism, modernism, architecture, exhibitions

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