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Cultural Production and the Generative Matrix: A Response to Georgina Born

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ABSTRACT

This article engages with several of the key issues raised by Georgina Born in her article in this edition. It begins with a consideration of the emphasis on 'production' in Born's piece, and argues that production studies are marked by an attentiveness to complexity that is often absent in studies of cultural reception. This response engages polemically with Born's call for a cultural analysis that includes moments of critical judgement, and argues against approaches to culture that are centrally concerned with questions of human creativity.

KEY WORDS

creativity / criticism / cultural production / culture / sociology of art / taste

I am honoured by the opportunity to comment here on the work of Georgina Born. Across two landmark books and a series of important articles, Born has established a distinctive analytic voice within such fields as media studies, cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology and the sociology of art. Even as she makes her own, personal contribution to these fields, her work shows commitment to an ideal of cultural analysis as a collaborative field marked by the respectful but polemical engagement of scholars with each other. These qualities are especially evident in 'The Social and the Aesthetic', the article to which these comments are a response.

In these brief remarks, I want to focus on three sets of issues raised by Born's article. The first of these has to do with the relative richness of production and reception as objects of analysis within a cultural sociology. Much of the strength of Born's work, I shall suggest, comes from her interest in cultural production, and her implicit resistance to the idea that the social meaning of a cultural artefact

is secured in the moment of its consumption. The second question to be addressed here has to do with the relationship between cultural sociology and critical judgement. In the interests of provoking further discussion of this important question, I will point to what I see as hesitations and ambivalences in Born's treatment of this issue. Finally, I will address the status of subjectivity and creativity in cultural analysis, a concern that runs through Born's article but receives particular attention in its second half. In taking up this question, I will point to some strands in cultural analysis that might stand, alongside those Born has identified, as fruitful avenues for work in cultural sociology.

In the very first sentence of her article, Born proposes a broadening of perspectives, from the sociology of art to the study of cultural production. I will not linger here on the move from art to the cultural, a shift of focus and definition that seems entirely appropriate but not unexpected. The most interesting reorientation here comes with Born's decision to highlight the term 'production'. This is a decision I welcome, fully conscious that I may be hijacking it for my own purposes. While the word 'production' appears more than 60 times in her article, the term 'reception', its usual companion, appears only three times. Even if we assume that Born's notion of 'cultural production' is an expanded one, encompassing all moments in the circulation of cultural objects through social life, her decision to identify her work with this term is revealing.

This emphasis on production reflects, I suspect, Born's biographical and intellectual affinities with cultural producers (like musicians and other creators), but that is clearly not the whole story. It expresses as well, I think, her interest in the complexities of such phenomena as institutional behaviour, human-object interaction, distributed intelligence and the unfolding histories of aesthetic form. These concerns have kept Born's work free of the easy, audience-centred populism of much cultural studies and media ethnography, work that is rarely interested in any processes that precede the arrival of the cultural artefact at its encounter with a citizen-consumer. Fifteen years of backlash against the image of cultural studies academics finding creative resistance in every act of consumption have not dislodged a principal edifice of so much cultural analysis – its insistence that the crucial cultural processes are those that transpire within acts of reception. As Born's article reminds us, if only by its example, the widespread emphasis on reception in cultural studies has slowed the influence of rich analytic traditions concerned with the complexity of cultural production. These traditions include those on which Born draws so productively, such as cultural anthropology, ethnographies of media production and versions of network analysis.

A focus on production has always seemed most pertinent to the study of what might loosely be called minoritarian cultural forms, like those produced by literary or musical avant-gardes. In such cases, to which Born has devoted much of her scholarship, the struggle to produce will normally seem more sociologically complex than the often fleeting and socially circumscribed moments in which these forms are consumed. A similar complexity marks cultural production transpiring within secondary national cultures, like those of Quebec (my home) or Denmark (where I have just spent some time), places in which the

making of culture usually involves multi-levelled systems of public and private support, literal and figurative acts of cultural translation, and the inescapable sense that each artefact embodies a particular relationship between *here* and a variety of *elsewheres*. In cinema and media studies, arguably, the emphasis on consumption or reception as determining moments in the life of social artefacts always seems to come easiest to those who inhabit cultures (like that of the USA) wherein the production of cultural artefacts is naturalized, experienced as the operation of general (rather than complex and locally determined) systems like those of capitalism or public life.

It is not simply that production studies allow the researcher to find complexity in cases, like those of avant-gardes or peripheral national cultures, where weak consumption fails to provide it. More importantly, I would argue, production studies resist the tendency to make of every cultural event a struggle in which meaning is the exclusive terrain and stake. The social textures, cultural temporalities and human-object relationships which are constitutive of cultural production and among its many effects have typically been grasped more productively in production studies than in analyses of consumption. This is not inevitably, or even always the case, I would acknowledge. Nevertheless, as I believe Born's work shows, the rich articulation of methods and premises that characterizes studies of cultural production is rarely evident in consumption studies, which move back and forth between the statistical and the ethnographic but rarely beyond or between these.

I do not want to dwell for too long here on Born's sharp critique of Pierre Bourdieu, and of *La Distinction* in particular. Born convincingly describes the most starkly visible fault line in this work: that between

a) a coherently conceived notion of bourgeois culture and
b) an account of working class culture unable to choose between a positive or negative definition of dominated 'knowledge'.

Still, I would argue that, for all the ways in which Bourdieu has been mobilized within populist defences of working class consumption, his work was richest when he turned to the internal logics of bourgeois aesthetics and when his focus shifted to what was, in essence, an account of artistic production (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987, 1992). Put crudely, and as my graduate students never fail to discover, Bourdieu's elaboration of the concept of field is much more easily and convincingly operationalized than that of habitus. The shift in focus in his work, from inter-class dynamics to the internal logics of bourgeois culture seems designed in part to absolve Bourdieu of the thorny questions posed by a working class engaged in making sense of cultural forms in whose production it was rarely involved. This leaves the character of working class taste as an unresolved problem in his work, but provides us with accounts of bourgeois aesthetic production that strike me as much richer than Born suggests. A passage like the following, it seems to me, reduces aesthetics neither to the expression of a structural position nor to the enactment of strategy:

> This the invention of the pure aesthetic is inseparable from the invention of a new social personality, that of the great professional artist who combines, in a union as fragile as it is improbable, a sense of transgression and freedom from conformity with the rigour of an extremely strict discipline of living and of work, which presupposes bourgeois ease and celibacy and which is more characteristic of the scientist or the scholar. (Bourdieu, 1996: 111)

It is true that there are things poorly dealt with in a Bourdieuian sociology of art: the ratio between what Greg Urban has called the accelerative and the inertial dimensions of cultural artefacts (Urban, 2001: 20); the particular role of cultural artefacts in organizing our sense of historical time; the question of the coherence of historical moments; and the affective dimensions of nostalgia, and so on. While Bourdieu's inattenion to questions of time is strikingly obvious, this has always seemed to me to be the price one must pay for an analysis not endlessly preoccupied with resistance and change. It is characteristic of a Bourdieuian sociology to 'topologize' every instance of change over time: that is, to cast it as a spatial reconfiguration (or reproduction) of relations between actors and their places within particular social topographies. This has provided a usual caution, I suggest, for dealing with cultural fields (like those of artistic avant-gardes or industrialized commodity culture) whose rhetorics of self-promotion and self-understanding are saturated with claims about change and disruption.

A key and compelling dimension of Born's article is her commitment to the positivity of the aesthetic. This positivity, it seems to me, has several important features. In the first place, Born's work is interested in the genuine and specific forms of knowledge and experience embedded within the aesthetic. Her work does not 'flatten' the aesthetic so as to make it simply one 'level' of signification among many, nor cast it as a loosely affective supplement to other forms of experience or cognition. At the same time, Born is interested in the aesthetic in a way that blocks its reduction to the mere negation of dominant sociocultural forces. In other words, the aesthetic is not simply a sociocultural realm, parallel to those of meaning and cognition, in which critical, transgressive or resistant impulses hibernate or from which they trouble or haunt those dominant forces. Finally, Born's work acknowledges the inventive, productive character of cultural production as a specifically aesthetic activity, and the distinctive temporalities, forms and conventions in whose creation that production is involved.

While I am convinced by Born's insistence that the 'analysis of cultural production' is best when it includes an account of aesthetic processes and categories, I am less drawn to the claim that one of the purposes of cultural analysis is to 'proffer judgements of value' about works. In her lengthy discussion of judgement in this article, it seems to me that Born's position never quite settles: between a view of judgement as one of the aesthetic processes going on in a particular cultural terrain, to be studied as such; and her own call to scholars to engage in judgement as an analytic act made possible by 'the reflexive, sociological understanding of the operations, institutionalization and imbrication in processes of cultural production of what – by analogy with interpretive communities – might be called value communities'.

In her extended discussion of this question, Born moves carefully through the positions of others. She quotes, with approval, James Weiner's argument that '[w]e don't have to decide what beauty is in the realm of the artistic, but we do have to confront the manifest ways with which a social entity produces conventions of all sorts for itself.' Here, it seems to me, we have a classic statement on a division of responsibilities between the social analysis of culture and the activity of critical judgement. In Born's discussion of the work of ethnomusicologist Steven Feld and media anthropologist Eric Michaels, however, social analysis and criticism are brought closer together, with varying conclusions. In Feld, as Born summarizes his work, there is a clear sense that certain aesthetic qualities of music correspond more fully than others to socially grounded values or ideals, and that this correspondence stands as a criterion of aesthetic value whose fulfilment the anthropologist or cultural analyst may judge. Aesthetic judgement, it seems here, may be derived from a social analysis able to identify aesthetic purposes and the degree of their successful realization.

While Born invokes Feld as a model of analysis enriched by critical judgement, her own position on the intertwining of the two is difficult to isolate with precision. In a key passage in her article, she writes that

> [i]n marked contrast to Gell, there is an understated sense in the writings of Feld, Michaels, Myers and Pinney in which the exegesis of the object is so roundly elaborated, including aesthetic qualities and their historical conditions, that it envisages or elicits cultural criticism. Questions of value, that is to say, are not foreclosed.

I share with Born her admiration for these pieces of cultural criticism, for the sensitivity and erudition each brings to its 'exegesis of the object'. I am convinced, as well, that each of these works offers a conceptual vocabulary which those concerned with evaluating such works (as cultural journalists, say, or as grant adjudicators) would do well to invoke. In one of her most convincing lines of argument, Born speaks of the overlap and traffic between social analysis and critical judgement, and of the migration of vocabularies and other resources between them. The greater this traffic in ideas, she suggests, the more likely it is that we will have 'a richer repertoire of methodological and conceptual resources to inform critical discourses and processes of judgement-making than before'.

A cultural analysis that 'envisages or elicits cultural criticism' is different, however, from an analysis that engages in such criticism as one of its key outcomes. Elsewhere, Born summarizes, approvingly, Fred Myers's argument that 'those from anthropology and sociology who study creative practices should engage reflexively in the production of criticism'. She had already spoken, early in her article, of the need for scholars to 'offer a critical interpretation of the object'. This interpretation, she suggests, will be derived from an analysis attentive to aesthetic categories and their historical embeddedness. It will include judgement of such features of the cultural object as its degree of inventiveness or redundancy, or the extent to which its defining conventions are 'either propitious and generative, or unpropitious and in decline'.

My own reservations here are mild, but they represent my key point of dissent from Born's work. The attempt to ground judgement in the terms of aesthetic analysis will always flounder, it seems to me, on the need for externally derived criteria of value. Judgement will still require that one argue separately for the superiority of inventive over redundant works of art, or of works that disturb rather than confirm structures of perception and feeling. I am quite comfortable expressing an aesthetic preference for the redundant cultural object, on idiosyncratically personal or political grounds, but that judgement cannot be generated by my analysis of that object (though it may marshal the results of that analysis in its justifications.) Neither the illusion of value-free analysis nor the thorny problems of analytic self-reflexivity will be cured by the proffering of critical judgement, it seems to me. While my own work, like that of anyone else doing cultural analysis, is full of value judgements both implicit and explicit, these are among the many registers on which academic work communicates, residues of the multiple impulses and commitments that shape it. They are not the coherent expression of the analysis that precedes them, nor the means by which that analysis assumes its primary public value.

One of the most intriguing questions winding its way through Born's article has to do with the appropriate place of creative subjectivity in cultural analysis. The centrality accorded to creativity has become a key criterion by which analytic positions may be differentiated in the present moment. A range of recent writings work to rescue creativity, both from a Bourdieuian account which reduces it to strategic position-taking, and from culturalist models which cast creativity as little more than a mystification of those processes by which a culture speaks to itself. In works inspired by Deleuzian work on invention, for example, and in the writings of Brian Massumi, Erin Manning and others, creativity is one in a series of subject-centred concepts newly reinvigorated, alongside others like affect, improvisation, performativity and sensation (e.g. Massumi and Manning, no date).

If this reinvigoration of creativity appears as something of a theoretical *dominant* at the moment, the starkest alternatives to it are those recent versions of cultural theory from which subjectivity disappears, in models focussed on the relationships between forms and objects. I am thinking, here, of the cultural anthropology of circulation developed by Gaonkar, Povinelli and others in the journal *Public Culture*, and of the wave of Kittlerian media theory marked by an engagement with what Matthew Griffin and others have called 'materialities of communication' (Griffin, 1996: 715). In a highly programmatic intervention in cultural theory, Gaonkar and Povinelli call for an analysis of circulating cultural forms 'going about their daily reproductive labour of mediating psychosocial praxis' (2003: 391). This labour of mediation is one in which creative or perceiving subjects are reduced to minor nodes, in processes that have more to do with infrastructures of movement than acts of reading or reception. Similarly, in the cold anti-humanism of Kittlerian media theory, we are invited to see human subjects as one among many means by which technologies communicate with each other.

One way of capturing the difference between these alternatives is by examining the ways in which they offer themselves (openly or implicitly) as alternatives to Pierre Bourdieu. A populist cultural studies often works with an enhanced or inflated notion of subjectivity as that which overflows the strategic interests characteristic of particular social positions. This is intended to restore, to a Bourdieuian analysis of taste, a degree of agency otherwise lacking. At the other extreme, we find the theoretical reduction of subjectivity, within models of cultural and social life organized around 'circulatory matrices' (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003: 388) or systems of 'calculation, distribution, and storage' (Fuller, 2005: 38). Here, the tactics of calculating subjects become minor variables within authorless processes by which fields and relationships are made and transformed. Subjectivity will remain, as one of the congealed (or distributed) forces which travels with a work, but subjectivity is not the key and determining terrain on which the decisive processes in cultural life are played out.

My own sympathies are with this second group of approaches and with the reduction of subjectivity that is one of their most prominent features. This means that I am interested in the rather anonymous ways in which 'the edges of forms' (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003: 301) connect within various kinds of assemblage and produce the interlocking textures of cultural life. This means that, while I am drawn to Gell's highly useful notion of the 'distributed object', what interests me are the rather unauthored, collective processes of dispersion and condensation by which sense-making assumes its material forms. This means, as well, that if the images studied by Christopher Pinney are, as Born says, 'part of an aesthetic, figural domain that can *constitute history*', this holding and transmission of history are not dependent upon the wilful, creative acts of image-making one might assume. Rather, these operations are part of what Gaonkar and Povinelli, invoking Foucault, call 'the quiet work of the generative matrix' (2003: 391). The best argument against Bourdieu, arguably, is not that people are doing things with images other than those his agonistics presumes, but that images are doing things 'on their own', through the complex ways in which their social circulation binds them to places, objects and clusters of sense.

Born's position in this appears nuanced, and I relish the prospect of pursuing these issues further with her. Her call for 'an account of agency as creative invention' sits alongside her enthusiasm for studies of collective or institutional processes in which such an account has not always been central. In the rich articulation of ideas and influences that marks Born's work, and this article in particular, I find resources for two very different directions in cultural analysis. One of these will rescue and inflate creativity, through a new theorization of agency, improvisation and creativity. The other will reduce the role of creativity, within models that stress mediality and the machinations of social discourses and networks. It is around these differences, it seems to me, that the key debates in cultural analysis are unfolding in the present time, and it is in relation to them that Born's work assumes its well deserved centrality.

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