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Pierre Bourdieu (1931–2002) was a world-renowned sociologist whose scholarship was inseparable from the campaigns against the instruments and institutions of social domination that made him France’s leading public intellectual. He is probably best known to architectural historians for his ethnomethodological study of the maison kabyle, the traditional house of the Berbers of Kabylia in northeastern Algeria, and to a broader academic public for the sociology of culture—of museums, painting, literature, and taste—in which he forged such concepts as cultural capital and the habitus, a system of dispositions. Of the several thousands of photographs Bourdieu took during his fieldwork in Algeria, the majority of which was subsequently lost; 120 of the surviving images from 1958 to 1960 were exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (IMA) on the first anniversary of his death.

The photographs were taken at a crucial period, when the trained philosopher retrained himself as an ethnographer and sociologist while teaching at the University of Algiers in the midst of the Franco-Algerian war. Only a handful had been seen before. Moreover, it was not generally known that Bourdieu avidly practiced what he would describe in his book Photography, a Middle-Brow Art as the art of the “man on the street.”1 The windfall of unpublished photographic documents adds a historical dimension to our understanding of Bourdieu that expands the one gained from his “ethnosociology” of Algeria. Even though, or rather because architecture with a “capital a” is absent from these images, practitioners and historians of architecture are among the many who will gain from Bourdieu’s photographic corpus.

The overarching subject of his Algerian research was the impact of the capitalist logic introduced by French colonization on the traditional precapitalist society of Kabylia, which was based instead on the logic of honor. The seven books and forty-three articles drawn from this study concerned especially the transformations brought on by the war. Specifically, Bourdieu and his collaborators studied the lives of the rural Kabyle who had been forced to resettle in the villages created and administered in the countryside by the French army (centres de regroupement) as well as of those (and others) who migrated to the shantytowns (bidonvilles) of the larger cities in search of work. These displacements occurred at the cost of great misery and suffering, but with some small gains that Bourdieu hoped would serve the future country whose independence he ardently supported.

The exhibition was divided into six sections. Five of them—War and Mutation, Habitus and Habitat, Displaced Peasants, Men and Women, and Economy of Misery—followed a historical order that paralleled the migrations of the Kabyle while recalling the publications that emerged from Bourdieu’s study of them. Habitus and Habitat, for example, corresponded to his famed essay “The Berber House or the World Reversed.” The sixth section was devoted to photographs of everyday life in Algiers and the smaller town of Bilda, which Bourdieu himself had arranged in albums according to themes. It was here that the Algiers most familiar to students of architecture, that of the port and the casbah, appeared.

In keeping with Bourdieu’s desire that the photographs be shown not as artistic works but as the primary research materials they had been originally and as the sociohistorical documents they later became, the curators—Franz Schultheis, a Swiss sociologist, and Christine Frisinghelli, the editor of Camera Austria—provided an installation so sparse that it could be described as an anti-installation. This asceticism was sustained by the design of the Galerie d’Actualité, one of the few spaces in Jean Nouvel and Architecture Studio’s IMA that is devoid of arabizing accents. Context was provided by a videotaped interview in which Bourdieu described how the “punishment” of his conscription in 1955 into a war that he opposed became the “chance of my lifetime.” From the fieldwork done in “difficult,” and often downright “dangerous” conditions, came the “problems and questions” on which he would work for the rest of his life.

In January 2003 in Paris, it could be surmised that there was no need for any more context than that. Bourdieu’s unexpected death in 2002 had inspired a national debate about the exact nature of his significance that was then ongoing. The IMA presentation, however, assumed familiarity not only with Bourdieu’s oeuvre but also with the circumstances of the Franco-Algerian war and the geography of Algeria. There was, therefore, no way to learn that Bourdieu had chosen to stay in Algeria at a time during which his greatest output was produced.
when “liberals” like himself were subject to arrest by an army that systematically used torture; that two of his university colleagues had been tortured, one to death; or that Bourdieu narrowly escaped arrest four times. These facts, and the geographical one that the Berber house in the photographs exhibited was in the “forbidden zone” that had been emptied of its inhabitants, would have endowed the word “elective” in the show’s subtitle with the full force it deserves, while respecting Bourdieu’s dictum that the historical is the sociological and vice versa.

The photographs provide a point of entry into Bourdieu’s work. An analogue of his sociological method, photography allowed him to keep the distance he needed for scientific inquiry, that of objectivation, while requiring from him a consciousness of that distance and of the shortcomings of social scientific claims to objectivity. This double distancing, a moving away from others that brings oneself closer to one’s own situation with regard to the subject of study, also sustained him when he witnessed the enormous sufferings of people for whom he felt a strong affinity.

Photography, he said in the posthumously published interview in the accompanying book, “sharpened his awareness,” of others, of himself, and of the defects of scholarship, especially of its self-absorbed “scienticism.” The pictures predicted both the methodology and the subject matter of much of his work to come. The future (very) public adversary of globalization’s industrialization of agriculture captured the phenomenon in its infancy in a photograph of a long line of Algerian laborers belted together to form a human sulphate-spraying machine. The future student of taste and defender of those classified by “good” taste as vulgar and beyond repair paid particular attention to the women of Algiers, whose robes and veils did not hinder their urban modernity as they window-shopped in three-inch heels, viewed exhibits at the Foire d’Algérie, or engaged in the daily routine of marketing. The photographs challenged the colonists’ contention that Algerians were incapable of organized or ordinary economic life and hygienic domesticity, and that women’s practices were evidence of that incapacity. In short, the photographs display the regard (in all of its French senses of glance, vision, attention, and consideration) so evident in Bourdieu’s sociology. That regard becomes even more accessible because it can literally be seen.

Architectural historians are likely to benefit from their access to this material, as are all students of Bourdieu. So will be, one hopes, some of his critics, who may find reasons to reconsider their views. The photographs forcefully challenge the widely held belief that because he opposed aestheticism and the social discrimination implicit in the very notion of good taste, Bourdieu was also insensitive to the visual and lacked an aesthetic sensibility. In various interviews with Schultheis, Bourdieu discussed photographs aesthetically, but never merely aesthetically. He had sought to eschew what he called the picturesque, the subjects that professional French photographers whom he encountered in Algeria favored as painterly, exotic, or presumably typical of the country and its inhabitants. By his own admission, his photograph of a veiled woman on a scooter—the ne plus ultra of modernity in Algiers of 1958—was one that these photographers could easily have taken. However, in contrast to the picturesque, he sought what he called the baroque, that is, an unexpected composition whose power lay in both its visual and social content. In baroque photographs, a powerful, even disconcerting social reality is captured in a way that bears a respectful, unobtrusive relationship to those photographed. An example is the photo-
The photographer mentioned above; shot in profile and from below, these human machines are monumentalized. Bourdieu took photographs, as well, for the sheer pleasure of recording what he found beautiful in the country and to express his emotional attachment to its inhabitants. The picture of a toddler bringing home a loaf of bread almost her own size, taken against the white walls of a bidonville, was one of his preferred photographs. It pleased him because the composition, in which a small darkish figure bearing a great responsibility is seen against the stark white wall, was both striking and laden with feeling, but without sentimentality.

From these descriptions, it should be evident that Bourdieu's picturesque corresponds to Edward Said's orientalism and that Bourdieu was vigilant about its appearance in his images. The difference between his pictures and those that could be viewed as orientalizing can be seen in his treatment of women. For example, he almost invariably photographed Kabyle women, who generally go about unveiled, at a great distance. Urban women, many of whom took up the veil as a sign of opposition to the return of General Charles de Gaulle to power and the institution of a French Algeria policy (May 1958), are captured at a closer distance, but rarely frontally. Unlike many historians of the photography that is deemed orientalist, Bourdieu readily recognized that the photographers of the picturesque could be motivated by sympathy for the human subjects, but were impeded by their ignorance of the country and its conditions from taking a more self-reflective approach.

Bourdieu did not examine place on its own and for its own sake, but the notion is nonetheless virtually omnipresent in the photographs. Places were shot for the documentary purpose of preserving what would surely soon perish, to record spatial contexts that would later be described in the books, or to bear witness to the effects of war. The photograph of the Berber houses that had been unroofed by the French army to force the inhabitants out of the forbidden zone fall into all four categories. Most frequently, place lent a physical context that contributed to and revealed the lives and practices of the individuals he observed. A lean-to roof protecting a tailor at work outdoors and peddlers' carts and ephemeral, but elaborate, displays demonstrate that the men transplanted to urban settings pursued newly invented professions with great ingenuity. This "small a" architecture ennobled the men's activities and thereby contributed to the preservation of their honor. Bourdieu's photographs invert the usual visual hierarchy and values of the photography of place, in which the human presence provides scale for the built, natural, or designed environment. It is architecture that gives an accurate measure of the human, not only framing but enlarging the individual's humanity.

The exhibition expanded the view of Bourdieu to encompass visuality as part of what he would call his art. At the end of his career, he compared himself to an artist and sociology to an art, using the word to mean a way of doing, a modus operandi, métier, or craft—in short, a habitus. All those whose métier is visual, and for whom the historical is also the sociological, will find in these photographs a reason to read Bourdieu. Those who have read him will find one more reason to mourn his loss.

**HELEN LIPSTADT**
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Publication related to the exhibition:

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Images d'Algérie. Une Affinité élec-

Notes

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