The French Alternative to Bourdieu? Hennion, Actor-Network Theory, and the Sociology of Mediation

ALEX VAN VENROOIJ
University of Amsterdam
A.T.vanVenrooij@uva.nl

The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation, the English translation of La Passion Musicale (1993) by French sociologist Antoine Hennion, comes at a timely moment. In recent years, several authors in the United Kingdom and the United States have urged the sociology of art and culture to move into a new, post-Bourdieu direction (Fuente 2007; Prior 2011; Beljean, Chong, and Lamont 2016). Switching from one French source to another, this post-Bourdieu movement has, to a large extent, looked for inspiration to one of the homegrown French theoretical alternatives to Bourdieu—actor-network theory—and in particular to the work of Antoine Hennion, who has been a “traveling companion” to Bruno Latour and Michel Callon at the CSI institute in Paris and has been responsible for developing the “art and culture” wing of actor-network theory.

The long-awaited translation of Hennion’s main theoretical work on the “sociology of mediation” is thus sure to be a major event for the post-Bourdieu movement and those seeking inspiration in actor-network theory. Reading The Passion for Music can therefore be a rather dizzying, frustrating experience, since the key concept (2005:236)—like a negative King Midas: it turns everything of gold into dust. The artist becomes a “cultural producer” whose work can be explained by mundane sociological facts, the art lover a “cultural consumer” driven to art by games of social distinction, and the artwork a “cultural product” whose value is the outcome of arbitrary processes of historical selection and valuation. The sociology of art, according to Hennion, excels at demystifying and desacralizing art and is “obsessed with knocking the artistic object off its pedestal” (p. 74). It seems more a sociology against art than a sociology of art. Although probably not all sociologists of art consider this “reductionism” problematic (but rather the aim and contribution of sociology to the study of art), Hennion is convinced that this approach to art signals deep flaws within sociology’s thinking about the role of cultural objects, and he believes it should be amended by a “non-reductive” model of how art objects and society are connected, which his theory of mediation aims to accomplish.

To explain what Hennion’s “theory of mediation” entails is not a simple task, also because—as he himself acknowledges—the concept of “mediation” is compatible with the theories that he wants to criticize as well as with the theoretical alternative he himself develops. Reading The Passion for Music can therefore be a rather dizzying, frustrating experience, since the key concept
itself is already an inherently disorienting signpost. Since the term “mediation” is used by Hennion in various ways both negative and positive and is as much part of the theoretical problem as it is of the solution, it does not initially help in finding one’s bearing in what is unquestionably an impressively erudite but also a quite, to use his own term, “opaque” piece of writing.

What does become abundantly clear in the first 150 pages of The Passion for Music, which he dedicates to a wide-ranging, critical discussion of the major sociological and historical approaches to the study of art, is that Hennion strongly objects to the theory of “mediation” as it was developed by Durkheim. The theory of mediation should therefore not be interpreted as a theory of symbolization, in which cultural objects are considered as “arbitrary” signs used by groups to represent themselves—a model for thinking about the relationship between art and society that later came to full fruition within the “critical sociology” of Bourdieu, who sees cultural objects as “mere” symbolic means to mark social boundaries. On the contrary, in his typical metaphorical style of writing, Hennion describes Durkheim as the one who “instilled a poison into sociology” by treating cultural objects in this “circular” way as part of “a group’s relationship to itself,” which he sees as emptying cultural objects of any inherent meaning. Although Durkheimian “symbols” can be said to mediate the process of group formation, this is the “thin” theory of mediation that Hennion wants to displace.

Hennion finds a more positive model for the theory of mediation in what he calls the “linear models” of the “new history of art” by authors like Michael Baxandall, Francis Haskell, Carlo Ginzburg, and Svetlana Alpers. In their attempt to discard the facile parallelisms between artworks and social forces of earlier (oftentimes Marxist) art historians, these new art historians zoomed in on the proximate, concrete actions of intermediaries such as patrons and collectors and thereby identified the “median zone where the intermediaries of art are at work [that] prevent us from falling by turns into internal analysis . . . or into external analysis, which reduces this rich world too soon to the status of being ‘merely’ an arbitrary cloak draping the group” (p. 10). What Hennion likes about this work is that it tends “to accept the art object” and reinforce it “by giving it additional reasons for being” (p. 157). While circular models only study art for the purpose of returning to the social, linear models take artworks as given and aim to explain them as part of a complex network of mediations.

This historical excavation of the “median zone of intermediaries” is in many ways quite similar to the sociological approach to art, especially in Becker’s art world or Bourdieu’s field approach. Both “close in” on the artwork by studying the various intermediaries who contribute to the collective production of art. Hennion indeed also acknowledges this affinity by praising Bourdieu for “saturating his field of study with mediations” (p. 71) and similarly applauds Becker for populating the art world with various intermediaries and for “putting the producers of art supplies, those who distribute the works, audiences, artists, critics, publishers, the state, and theoreticians on the same plane” (p. 86). But, again, Hennion (at least in this book) wants to draw a strong boundary between the sociological theories of mediation by Bourdieu and Becker and those of the “new art historians” and, by extension, his own theory of mediation.

Hennion, for example, criticizes both Bourdieu and Becker for upholding a version of a “theory of belief.” Bourdieu is taken to task for arguing that the value of art is upheld as a collective illusion by a circle of believers—critics, artists, teachers, audiences, and so forth—who Bourdieu, even more reprehensibly, portrays as operating in bad faith, since they deny the social construction of art and artistic value in order to profit from this denial in games of social distinction.

Similarly, Becker is criticized since his labeling theory—that art is what art worlds collectively define as art—can also be interpreted as saying that people are somehow duped into believing in art. Also, he contrasts the “local” models of historians to the “global” models of sociologists, which I interpret to mean that sociologists are predominantly interested in explaining how general features of a social context of production affect the characteristics of a large number of artworks, which necessarily leads to somewhat of

Contemporary Sociology 47, 4
a reduction of complexity, in which Hennion sees the danger of reducing the workings of many mediators to a few privileged causes.

And, perhaps most importantly, Hennion favors the fact that the new historians, in their search for mediators, did not stop when confronted with the artwork itself. The artwork is (just) one more mediator among mediators. Haskell, for example, included in his analysis how the material of Greek statues informed the use of specific evaluative registers; Baxandall how paintings trained the visual habits of viewers; and Alpers how Rembrandt’s personal style of painting created its own market for “real” Rembrandts. The artworks themselves, in other words, also become “active” and “effectual”—and are not, so to say, the end point of the analysis, but one more chain in an expanding network of mediations.

Although Hennion does not often refer explicitly to actor-network theory in The Passion for Music, in this choice for the “new historians” and against the sociology of art, the influence of certain ANT principles becomes quite clear. ANT is, for example, known for working with a “flat ontology” in which no particular element of the “actor-network” takes priority over others and all (human and non-human) mediations matter as far as they have effects and bring about changes to the network. This flat ontology not only easily allows for the inclusion of the artwork itself and the materiality of objects, which becomes just another mediator that acts upon the network, but also works against the privileging of a certain mediation as the supreme cause—that is, against a privileging that would reduce other mediations to passive placeholders or non-actors. ANT also aims to avoid reifying social structures and “objects” but sees these as consisting of complex networks, assemblages, or associations.

Hennion can therefore describe an artwork, or an artist like J. S. Bach—as discussed below—as consisting of a whole “mass” of mediations. This means that for him, studying these mediations, including the activities of intermediaries that other sociologists also typically study, is the study of the object itself, and not—as for most sociologists—a way to make the object disappear or brush it aside. Although this sounds a little like a play on words, the study of mediations in this way intends to add and not detract from the artwork.

This should also be seen in the context of ANT’s adherence to a form of constructivism that does not denounce the reality of the constructed object. To use Latour’s example: taking someone to a construction site and showing them how a house is built is not the same as showing them that it is not real. In that way, Hennion—just as in other “production of culture” approaches—wants to show how art is made, how it emerges out of a network of associations, but without implying that it is thus “only” or “merely” a construction: “By being socially constructed, the object does not cease to exist: on the contrary, it thereby becomes more present” (p. 279).

The sociological study of music—to which Hennion dedicates the second part of the book—is the domain par excellence for illustrating his theory of mediation. This is because music, as an “object,” has an elusive quality: whenever you try to point to the musical work itself, you end up pointing to mediators—discs, scores, instruments, concert halls, singers. It is never just there, but rather “something or someone always has to be there to make the air vibrate” (p. 245). Or, to use Becker’s term, there is a “fundamental indeterminacy” to the musical object, as it depends for its existence on a network of mediators and to “become present” it has to be made over and over again.

The second half of the book consists then of a series of case studies, which vary from historical, meso-level analyses on Bach and Baroque music to micro-interactional studies of a music lesson, a concert visit, and the taste rituals of music-lovers. While they address different levels of analysis and range from preliminary essayistic reflections to full-fledged empirical case studies, these chapters all deal with the question of how the musical object (and subject) emerges and appears from a constellation of mediators.

In “The Baroque Case,” this question takes the form of understanding the historical emergence, institutionalization, and deinstitutionalization of different interpretations of ostensibly the “same” music: how a neotraditional, musicologically informed way of playing and listening to Baroque music, using long-forgotten instruments like the
harpsichord and the lute, came to compete with and, in the end, displace the modern, nineteenth-century symphonic approach. What Hennion wants to make clear is that this “victory” of the neo-traditionalists was not a triumph of (musicalogical) truth over error, or merely an outcome of a Bourdieusian field struggle of schools competing over resources and recognition, but a challenge to and a reassembling of a complete “web of practices” or “chain of stabilizations.”

Hennion takes a seemingly more institutional approach when describing how the neo-traditional Baroque movement gained ground and eventually defeated the Moderns by toppling one element of the Moderns’ web of practices at a time: “Once audiences adopted the harpsichord, they soon embraced ornamentation, as well as unequal rhythms which combine so well with embellishments . . . . In other words, it was a long and heterogeneous series of interconnected mediations which led to the irreversible success of the Baroques” (pp. 189–90). The initial resistance of the Moderns to neo-traditionalist interpretations was also not based on ignorance or the making of “an error which they would gladly have corrected if only they had known” (p. 195). The resistance was institutional and anchored in self-concepts and the bodily, ingrained schemas of temporality and rhythm that tied the Moderns to their particular way of performing and reading Baroque music.

The chapter on Baroque music shows how ANT brings a dynamic and processual perspective to the study of art worlds and focuses attention on the role of material objects in anchoring and (de)stabilizing these worlds—which some might consider a distinct advantage of ANT over Bourdieu’s arguably more static field theory. It also provides a useful corrective to Bourdieu, who did not address the role of technology and material objects to the extent that Hennion proposes. But the most striking and consequential theoretical difference between Hennion and Bourdieu is that Hennion posits a relational network of mediations but rejects the existence of any preexisting or overarching structure: “Outside a mediation, there appears not an autonomous world but another mediation” (p. 224). In his chapter on Bach, Hennion therefore does not position Bach in an existing field—as, for example, Bourdieu did for Flaubert, or Norbert Elias for Mozart. According to Hennion, “Bach does not join an already made musical universe; rather he generates it anew, helps create it piece by piece, through the invention of a new taste for music” (p. 248). He thus does a “forward-tracing” study of how Bach turned into a “gigantic mass, in the geological sense, made up of the accumulation over time and space of a multitude of devices supporting one another” (p. 256) and shows how Bach became the center of this mass of mediations. But there seems to be no sense of a broader social context that might have been important in understanding this process of accumulation.

The chapter on Baroque music also illustrates what remains a weakness of the ANT approach, namely that it is strong on description but weak on explanation. Although Hennion explicitly wants to solve an explanatory question (“Why the Baroques eventually won over the Moderns”), his theoretical framework actually does not offer much traction in providing such an answer. The framework is limited to the concept of mediations, lacking more specific mechanisms or concepts that can explain these dynamics. The “catch-all” concept of mediations allows Hennion to point to a range of different proximate factors—such as the actions of radio programmers, record labels, changing tastes of audiences, and innovations in sound amplification, as well as the incremental replacement of modern elements with neo-traditional elements just mentioned—that apparently are all important but fail to cohere into a convincing explanatory narrative.

In the last chapter of the book, Hennion shifts to the micro-interactional study of taste and music lovers—a theme that he has dealt with more extensively in his recent work. Hennion wants to show here, contra Bourdieu, that taste is more than a passive, mechanical expression of a class position. Taste is not a given, but an activity, an attempt at making something happen. The listener is not a passive “cultural dope”; rather, taste and tasting are processes whereby the listener learns and trains himself or herself to—paradoxically—actively create the
effect of being passively transported and transformed by music.

Hennion describes the private “ceremonies of pleasure”—enabled by the “disco-morphosis of listening” (listening to recordings)—in which music lovers set up a carefully crafted but uncertain stage for the emergence of music. The listener discovers how, with the right use of mediations (discs, high-fidelity speakers, etc.), that moment can be accomplished in which music becomes present and immediate. These private rituals of taste also illustrate how many taste practices are not public, for social display and strategic gains, but for self-discovery in the privacy of your own home—something that others do not necessarily have to know about, like the private rituals of drug addicts that are more socially shameful than advantageous.

This micro-interactional focus leads to rich descriptions of taste activity and unearths a wider set of motivations for seeking aesthetic experiences, such as identity formation and emotion management, beyond the ulterior motives of social positioning. But in avoiding seeing taste as “the passive play of social differentiation” (p. 269), and by keeping the focus on the co-constitutive relation between what people do with art and what art does to people in direct cultural encounters, the analysis does not reach much further than a description of these situations. The wider social context of institutions, organizations, and social structures again remains hidden from view as a result of the “maxim” of actor-network theory that only allows for explanations when these can be made concrete by identifying and describing the actions of proximate intermediaries. The lesson of Baxandall that “we must absolutely abstain from forging connections where there is no identifiable intermediary” obscures those phenomena that field theory was originally designed to explain: hidden forces that cannot be traced to concrete interactions.

When the wider environment is invoked, it is interestingly only to refer to the technical means whereby the listening experience is constituted, as when Hennion mentions that the increased use of recordings has allowed for a different, more solitary and private form of listening. But ignoring the social location of taste—for fear of using sociological reifications such as class, nation-states, and so forth—seems overly restrictive in light of decades of research showing the importance of these social structures on taste. Even if we agree that taste has non-utilitarian motivations and uses that are more intrinsic and self-oriented than Bourdieu would admit, most sociologists would probably want to ask whether such non-utilitarian motivations also have a social location. Perhaps the “access to pleasure” can vary among groups (as argued by Swidler 2010), or the emphasis on intrinsic, personal aesthetic experiences is itself a social mechanism of exclusion (as argued by, for example, Thornton 1995). But Hennion’s theoretical framework does not allow those questions to be asked. Everything is to occur in the situation itself, in the unstable, unpredictable associations of actor-networks. But exterior social structures do matter and have predictable effects. And sociologists of art probably will want to keep invoking them.

References