

# **Bourdieu and the sociology of cultural evaluation: lessons from the Italian popular music press**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the impact of Pierre Bourdieu's social theorising on two related fields of debate, namely research about the evaluative practices of cultural critics, and research about the artistic legitimation of popular culture. More specifically, the article argues that the concept of field (Bourdieu 1993, 1996) makes it possible to investigate the ways in which criticism, as a cultural category, is *struggled over* by competing groups of experts and audiences. In this respect, field theory helps to address criticism as *a field in itself*, rather than as an uncontested and uniform cultural institution. The article will first contend that Bourdieu's attention to struggles over classifications and practices remains underappreciated in the sociological research about critics; then, it will argue that a *field perspective* may enhance the study of the institutional diversification of criticism within popular culture. This claim will be substantiated discussing some findings of the author's research about popular music criticism, and more specifically about the rise of specialised music magazines (*riviste specializzate*) in 1970s Italy. The discussion will conclude considering the possibilities that field theory may open up for future research, particularly in relation to the impact of digital media on the institutions and practices of criticism (Hanrahan 2012).

## **KEYWORDS:**

Bourdieu, culture, criticism, media, music

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## 1. Bourdieu's legacy and the study of cultural evaluation

The role of critics for the functioning of both art worlds and media industries has been recognised by different theorists of cultural production, most notably by Paul Hirsch (1972), Howard Becker (1982) and Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996). Although very different from an epistemological point of view, and despite looking at different fields of practice, their theories underlined the *institutional* nature of cultural production in order to demystify a romantic conception of the artist as an individual imbued with extraordinary capacities. It is not surprising, then, that recent empirical studies about cultural journalists and media critics have been driven by sociologists' enduring interest for the organisational and symbolic conventions that make it possible the production and circulation of culture. In this respect, a number of scholars, for the most part inspired by the American sociology of culture, have investigated the role of critics within sectors like publishing (Janssen 1997), television (Bielby et al. 2005), film (Baumann 2001, 2002), popular music (Regev 1994, Binder and Cheyne 2010, van Venrooij and Schmutz 2010)<sup>2</sup> and, more recently, computer software (Blank 2007) and contemporary cuisine (Blank 2007, Baumann and Johnston 2007). By and large, this emergent 'sociology of cultural evaluation' has enquired about the widespread diffusion of experts and evaluative practices across the domains of contemporary popular culture, with only a few studies addressing those fields in which criticism is a well established institution, such as classical music (Glynn and Lounsbury 2005) and the performing arts (Shrum 1991, 1996).

The work of Pierre Bourdieu has made a strong impact on the aforementioned literature. More specifically, his scholarship on cultural fields (1993, 1996) and consumption practices (1984) has been used as a toolkit of analytic categories to be used for the study

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<sup>2</sup> Some research about music criticism has also been carried out by scholars working in the field of popular music studies (e.g. Lindberg et al. 2005). For reasons of space the article will not discuss this body of research.

of contemporary cultural fields. Quantitative cultural sociologists, in this respect, have widely used Bourdieu's conceptual distinctions in order to carry out descriptive and explanatory statistical analysis as well. For example, Bourdieu's definition of popular success as a form of market consecration, which, as such, is in structural opposition to the cultural legitimation provided by critics and peers (1993), has informed the works of Allen and Lincoln (2004) and Schmutz (2005) on the cultural consecration of film and popular music, respectively. Both studies measure the likelihood of posthumous consecration for movies and albums that received critical, popular or peer recognition at the time of their release, thus addressing the question of the cultural power of different consecrating institutions. Similarly, Bourdieu's distinction between two forms of cultural appreciation, namely an *aesthetic disposition* engaging with the formal and historical significance of cultural works, and a *popular disposition* praising the emotional and functional aspects of consumption (1984), has informed several studies dealing with the evaluative categories mobilised by critics in film (Baumann 2001, Bielby and Kersten 2012), music (Binder and Cheyne 2010, van Venrooij and Schmutz 2010) and television (Bielby et al. 2005). Focusing on 'quality' newspapers with national circulation, and mostly using quantitative content analysis, these studies show that popular culture, throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been increasingly evaluated according to 'highbrow' criteria like originality, complexity and historical significance. According to Bourdieu (1984: 9-96), these categories inform the aesthetic disposition of the dominant classes, as they are a *cultural capital* that is both inherited from family and reproduced through the education system. The aesthetic disposition produces a 'disinterested' relationship with cultural objects, one appreciating their artistic and historical significance, rather than their emotional impact or realism. The latter, for Bourdieu, are categories of appreciation embodied in the

working classes' popular disposition, which does not evaluate culture on the basis of its own history, but in relation to external needs (such as being 'entertained' after a long day of work). By and large, then, the studies discussed so far show that some genres and producers of popular culture have been increasingly treated as artistic objects by newspapers with a middle and upper-middle class readership.

To a lesser extent, studies of critics' discursive repertoire have also combined the attention to shifting cultural classifications with the study of social exclusion, thus following Bourdieu's own interest for the way in which cultural practices contribute to the reproduction of social privilege. In this respect, it has been shown that although contemporary criticism undermines traditional forms of cultural authority (that is, the boundaries between high and popular culture), it also creates new social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). For example, the consecration of popular music has been accompanied by the marginalisation of women musicians within the Anglo-American pop-rock canon (Schmutz and Faupel 2010). On a similar note, van Venrooij (2011) has shown that critics tend to compare artists within (rather than across) racial categories. For example, they compare black artists with other black artists, thus reproducing enduring homologies between music genres and racial categories (such as the conception of jazz as a predominantly 'black' music genre).

Overall, the scholarship discussed so far has fruitfully employed Bourdieu's conceptual categories to explore the ways in which cultural classifications are changing within contemporary Western societies. Moreover, devising specific procedures to measure discursive repertoires across several decades (Baumann 2001, van Venrooij and Schmutz 2010), quantitative cultural sociologists have provided a distinctive methodological contribution to the historical study of cultural consecration. However, the sociology of cultural evaluation shows some significant limitations due to the usage

of Bourdieu's conceptual oppositions *outside* a field perspective. In this respect, while the vocabulary of field theory figures prominently in these studies, the theory's relational and genealogical underpinnings (Bourdieu 1993: 29-73, 1996: 177-208) remains mostly underappreciated. Bourdieu's genealogical approach, indeed, emphasises cultural fields as historical spaces subject to dynamics of change as well as reproduction. From this standpoint, the power and influence of critics depend on historical circumstances and may be subject to both challenges and changes. This perspective is absent, for example, in research about the retrospective consecration of popular culture. Indeed, studies exploring the likely influence of popular, critical and peer recognition (Allen and Lincoln 2004, Schmutz 2005) employ Bourdieusian categories in a deductive fashion, that is, as hypotheses to be tested through regression analysis.<sup>3</sup> As a result, they are not devised to address the ways in which consecrating institutions and their operations are received (and possibly challenged) by producers, audiences and other intermediaries within contemporary cultural fields. It remains unclear, then, to what extent classifications like popular, professional and critical recognition inform the categories of perception (Bourdieu 1996: 295-301) of field actors. More generally, the way in which critics see themselves and their role within specific cultural sectors remains difficult to investigate without considering the socio-historical genesis of both the institutions and classifications through which criticism is practised.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, according to Bourdieu's relational view of cultural production, artists can establish their position, and define their identity, only in relation to a pre-existing 'space of possibles' including other producers, institutions and, more generally, the history of the field itself (which includes genres and canons of consecrated authors

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3 For a discussion of regression analysis and its limitations, see Pisati (2010). See Blaikie (2003: 116-158) for a broader discussion of regressions vis-à-vis other forms of explanatory analysis.

4 Other studies using regression analysis similarly underestimate critics' and audiences' categories of perception. See Shrum (1991), Holbrook (1999) and Hsu (2006).

and works). This relational epistemology is mostly absent in the sociology of cultural evaluation, as it does not investigate the broader space of possibles in relation to which criticism, as a cultural category, is constructed by different actors (e.g. cultural producers, critics themselves and audiences).<sup>5</sup> I shall return to the importance of this relational and genealogical perspective in the article's methodological and empirical sections.

The literature reviewed so far also presents a second limitation. That is, it tends to construct critics as *reviewers*. In this respect, only a few studies opting for a different methodological palette (e.g. interviews and ethnographic research) have shed some light into the variety of organisational and editorial practices performed by critics. For example, Blank (2007) has studied the practices of organisations reviewing different consumer goods, such as software and restaurants, showing that they work according to different standards and procedures of evaluation. Further, Forde (2006) has addressed the power relationships between music journalists and press officers working for multinational labels, thus exploring the extent to which these relationships affect the practices of music magazines as organisations. Other studies, like Klein (2005) and Chong (2013), have explored critics' understanding of their role as reviewers of popular music and books, respectively. Using in-depth interviews, these studies provide important insights into reviewing as a social practice based on shared conventions and negotiation with other actors (such as colleagues, editors and press officers), albeit they still construct critics mostly as reviewers. While the studies using interviews and ethnographic research focus on production practices (and on criticism as an art world - Becker 1982), field theory allows for a broader understanding of the practices sustaining both the material and symbolic economy of cultural fields (Bourdieu 1990). For

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<sup>5</sup> For a broader discussion of Bourdieu's relational epistemology and its application to the study of contemporary cultural production (particularly journalism), see Benson (1999) and Marchetti (2005).

example, Italian music journalists, in order to distinguish themselves from the ‘elitism’ of official cultural institutions, put significant effort into the publication of readers’ letters and, as a result, into ongoing discussions about the purposes of popular music criticism. More specifically, mediating readers’ letters was a practice through which critics could specify their social role, justify their institutional choices and construct the popular music press as a space of ‘democratic’ conversation. As I discuss further in the article’s empirical sections, this practice was as important as reviewing in order to sustain the field’s symbolic economy.

More generally, a field perspective makes it possible to study criticism as a *field in itself*, one which is internally diversified and relatively autonomous from fields of cultural production and consumption. While this diversity has been clearly recognised by some scholars (Forde 2001, Lindberg et al. 2005),<sup>6</sup> critics have rarely been addressed as competing agents struggling not only over the meaning of cultural products, but over criticism itself as a category endowed with historically and contextually specific meanings. It is to this question that I turn in the following sections. After discussing the research’s methodological rationale, I will introduce the case of 1970s Italian music journalism; a field in which competing organisations struggled to define (along with their audience) the social relevance of popular music criticism.

## **2. Research design and methodological rationale**

The following discussion draws on a three-year doctoral research addressing the emergence of Italian popular music journalism between 1969 and 1977. The project is based on archival research; it employs music magazines as primary data and different

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<sup>6</sup> Lindberg et al. (2005) have used the concept of field to make sense of the differences between (and within) British and American rock criticism. However, they have focused mostly on the individual aesthetics of music writers and magazines, thus limiting the potential of the theory to questions of aesthetic difference.

historical sources as secondary data (e.g. interviews, statistical data, journalists' public biographies and memories). From a methodological point of view, it combines field theory (Bourdieu 1993, 1996) with discourse and content analysis, thus providing both a social history of the music press, and a thick description of the writings of journalists and readers. More specifically, while historical sources have been used to collect data about critics, their audience and the organisations producing music magazines (see below), discourse and content analysis have been used to focus on critics' categories of perception and position-takings. Following Bourdieu's relational epistemology, I analysed magazines' articles inductively in order to reconstruct the evaluative categories mobilised by critics, and the position-takings through which they defined both similarities and differences with other actors and fields. As a result, I was able to reconstruct the broader 'space of possibles' (Bourdieu 1996) in relation to which Italian critics constructed their positions. The focus on the years 1969-1977, then, has made it possible to analyse the resilience of the field's symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnàr 2002), and some of its early transformations. Compared to other historical studies of popular music criticism (Pires 2003, Lindberg et al. 2005), the methodology provides a more detailed analysis of the institutional and social differences shaping the field and the way in which critics themselves made sense of such differences. More importantly, it pays significantly more attention to the way in which critics constructed the boundaries between music criticism and other social spaces. Compared to studies using content analysis (Glynn and Lounsbury 2005, Binder and Cheyne 2010), discourse analysis (Lindberg et al. 2005) and interviews (Klein 2005, Blank 2007, Chong 2013), the research pays more attention to the cultural field (and the broader space of possibles) that enabled critics' practices and discourses.

The research focuses on three magazines: *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong*. Histories of

Italian popular music (e.g. Prato 2010) define these publications both as representative of the popular music press, and as competing editorial projects. I chose them in order to secure a variety of positions within the sample. The analysis of primary data is based on a sample including music-related features (297), editorials and articles about the magazines' cultural politics (192) and readers' letters (487).<sup>7</sup> I have worked on these editorial formats in order to analyse different evaluative practices: critics' position-takings about other fields and institutions (and the Italian space at large), music reviewing, and the mediation of readers' letters. I used discourse analysis to inductively analyse these sources, and content analysis to map recurring categories across the sample.<sup>8</sup> Overall, this research design makes it possible to explore the symbolic and social boundaries through which journalists and readers defined popular music criticism as an autonomous field of practice. Moreover, it allows for a consideration of criticism as a dynamic cultural category, one that is shaped by broader institutional and social transformations, but that also depends on ongoing symbolic labour and public justification.

### **3. A new field of practice: the genesis of popular music criticism in Italy**

In Italy, popular music has been an object of journalistic interest at least since the inception of *Sorrisi e Canzoni* (1952), a publication that became one of the most popular Italian tabloids during 1960s and 1970s. However, it is only from the late 1960s onwards that popular music criticism assumed the contours of a specific and internally diversified cultural field, albeit some forms of criticism, namely jazz criticism, had emerged long before this period.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, an unprecedented number of new magazines

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<sup>7</sup> The sample focuses on the years 1973-1977, as all three magazines were active during these years.

<sup>8</sup> I used content analysis to map both critics' evaluative criteria across the sample of music features, and the themes that they discussed with readers. The article does not discuss these findings.

<sup>9</sup> The first Italian magazine devoted to jazz (*Musica Jazz*) was founded in 1945.

was launched throughout the 1970s (**table 1**). If the 1960s had witnessed the emergence of teen magazines (*riviste giovanili*) devoted to a growing youth consumer culture (Grispigni 1998), the publications launched during the 1970s addressed specifically popular music genres like pop-rock, jazz and soul music, and were defined by both journalists and readers as specialised music magazines (*riviste specializzate*). This change, however, was made possible by a number of structural transformations that had occurred during the post-war years, both within the musical field and Italian society at large.

**Table 1. Popular music magazines launched during the 1970s**

1960s	1970s
<i>Teen magazines</i>	<i>New popular music magazines</i>
<i>Ciao Amici</i> (1963-1967, Milan) <i>Big</i> (1965-1967, Rome) <i>Ciao Big</i> (1967-1969, Rome) <i>Ragazza Pop</i> (1966-?, Rome)	<i>Ciao 2001</i> (1969-1998, Rome) <i>Muzak</i> (1973-1976, Rome) <i>Gong</i> (1974-1978, Milan) <i>Super Sound</i> (1972-1974, Rome) <i>Nuovo Sound</i> (1975-1981, Rome) <i>Qui Giovani</i> (1970-1974, Milan) <i>Sound Flash</i> (1972-1973, Rome) <i>Popster</i> (1978-1980, Rome) <i>Mucchio Selvaggio</i> (1977 onwards, Rome) <i>Rockerilla</i> (1978 onwards, Savona)

As shown by other field studies (Bourdieu 1996, Lindberg et al. 2005, Santoro 2010), transformations in national education systems represent a major precondition for the emergence of new cultural fields. In this respect, the rise of mass education was, by and large, one of the key transformations occurring during the post-war years in Italy (Ginsborg 1990).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the student condition, during the 1960s, became one of

<sup>10</sup> With the national law making education compulsory until the age of fourteen (1962), the number of young people attending secondary school increased from 416,348 to 2,197,750 units between 1951 and 1977. During the same years, university attendance rose from 231,000 to 936,000 units (Cavalli and Leccardi 1997).

the defining features of a youth identity based on increasingly distinctive lifestyles and choices of consumption (Cavalli and Leccardi 1997). In this respect, the popular music press emerging during the 1970s was defined primarily as an institution of the youth culture (notwithstanding the institutional differences among music magazines). Both journalists and their readers, then, had educational qualifications higher than the middle school (*scuola media*). As shown by a series of surveys commissioned by the music magazines *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong* between 1974 and 1977,<sup>11</sup> about 70 per cent of their readers were either students (that is, secondary school or university students) or working students (*studenti lavoratori*), with workers representing the smallest group of readers.<sup>12</sup> Similarly high educational qualifications characterised the profile of music journalists working for the same magazines. In this respect, an analysis of 34 biographical profiles (**table 2**)<sup>13</sup> shows that they were *liceali* (i.e. they had the diploma from a sciences or humanities-based high school), university students or graduates while working as music journalists.<sup>14</sup> More generally, the growth of mass education provided the popular music press with a sufficiently vast audience, one that possessed the cultural capital to appreciate distinctions between different ways of producing and consuming popular music. Moreover, it fostered the rise of new forms of cultural expertise, which, as I discuss below, challenged both established cultural classifications and institutions.

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11 I am summarising data that have been published by *Ciao 2001* (n. 22, 6 June 1976), *Muzak* (n. 12, October 1974; n. 12, April 1976) and *Gong* (n. 6, June 1975; booklet enclosed with the issue). The magazines collected these data through mail questionnaires.

12 Given the age of readers (between 15-25), it is very likely that the majority of workers had at least a secondary school diploma; a title that was already high in comparison with the average educational level of former generations (Cavalli and Leccardi 1997).

13 The table is based on a convenience sample of public biographical profiles collected through bibliographical and online sources. It represents the majority of founders and regular writers of the three magazines studied.

14 The biographies also show that journalists were predominantly male, born in the regions of North-Centre Italy (particularly in the city of Rome) and of middle and upper-middle class origins.

**Table 2. Music journalists writing on *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong* (1973-1977)**

<b>Date of Birth</b>	Born between 1950-1957 (16), 1945-1949 (6), 1942-1944 (3), 1938 (1), 1933 (1); no mention to date of birth (7)
<b>Education</b>	<u>Diploma (secondary school): 16*</u> - <i>liceo</i> : 14 - non-specified or other: 2  <u>Laurea (degree): 12</u>  No mention to education: 6

Further, the popular music press was shaped by some organisational transformations taking place within the Italian music industry during the 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, the post-war years saw the transition from a publishing-based model of music business to a one based on recordings. As a result, 45 singles became the standard for the commercial circulation of light music (*musica leggera*) and gained the lion's share of the industry's revenues as soon as the 1958 (De Luigi 1982: 17-22). During the same years, then, multinational record companies opened their sub-divisions in Italy. In this respect, the opening of divisions of WEA and CBS in 1972 marked the peak of a trend, which had seen, during the previous two decades, the entrance of Decca, EMI, Phonogram and RCA within the Italian market (*ivi*, 30-36). Overall, the Italian recording industry was an increasingly 'globalised' cultural sector, with Italy becoming an importer of Anglo-American music trends since the late 1950s (when American rock 'n' roll was first introduced in the country). These transformations provided the ground for important changes in consumption practices, particularly from the late 1960s onwards. It is during these years that processes of differentiation and distinction emerged in relation to the growing market for long-playings.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, long-playings started being defined as the coherent and original creation of artists. Anglo-

\* This number includes university drop-outs (1) and people who do not specify if attendance led to a degree (3).

<sup>15</sup> Between 1969 and 1979 the selling figures of albums rose from 4 to 20 million of copies (De Luigi 1982: 53), which fostered the creation of an album chart as soon as 1971.

American pop-rock musicians, as well as Italian singer-songwriters (Santoro 2010) and rock musicians, both contributed to this process. The latter, whose taste had been shaped by a range of American, British and French influences, explicitly defined their music as an original artistic creation (Facchinotti 2001). It is in relation to this strongly redefined musical field that 1970s music magazines started working as competing agents of legitimation, both for new forms of Italian popular music and the international music trends introduced by the recording industry. Other actors sustained the legitimation of new popular music genres during the 1970s; among them, journalists working for newspapers and non-specialised magazines (such as Enrico De Angelis, one of the main supporters of singer-songwriters; Santoro 2010) and a conspicuous number of musicians and entrepreneurs (see Fabbri 2007, 2011). A lack of historical and sociological research on these agents of legitimation makes it difficult to provide a detailed map.<sup>16</sup> However, the emergence of a specialised popular music press (one structured as a field in itself) shows that a broader, complex and contested redefinition of the high-low divide was taking place in Italy.

### *3.1 A shared commitment: breaking with Italian light music and mass culture*

Before turning to the institutional differentiation of the popular music press, it is important to consider the shared cultural and social boundaries through which journalists defined the field as an autonomous cultural space. In this respect, the import of Anglophone music styles contributed to the emergence of distinctive classifications among journalists and their readers. More specifically, 1970s music magazines like *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong*, advocated a neat distinction between pop-rock music and Italian light music, the latter being associated with Italian mass culture and its

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of earlier forms of cultural criticism about the singer-songwriters, see Tomatis (2010).

institutions (such as the *Sanremo Festival*<sup>17</sup> and tabloid magazines).

Once upon a time there was Sanremo... A world of flowers, paillettes and light songs (*canzonette*) that had words rhyming with 'heart'. The press covering this kind of events was all about the lives of celebrities (*spiccioli di cronaca mondana*). However, the 1960s saw the beat explosion, that strange 'thing' coming from England... People in their twenties stopped yawning. During those years, some kids of good will and a few adventurous magazines acted as improvised chroniclers for a youth hungry for new sounds. They provided some information and a lot of cheap myths (*facili miti*). But the times have changed and the myths have been put back to their right perspective. A new musical culture has emerged and the interests of the youth have become more thoughtful. These are the needs which give birth to *Gong*.<sup>18</sup>

As this self-presentation of the magazine *Gong* shows, the break with the world of *Sanremo* implied a series of social and cultural distinctions. First, it was a generational rupture, with the magazine being identified with a youth culture informed by an Anglo-American musical 'education'. Second, it implied a distinction between two dispositions (Bourdieu 1984) towards music. In this respect, *Gong* sustained a more mature and «thoughtful» musical culture, one rejecting the banality of Italian sentimental light songs, and a style of reporting focused on the lives of celebrities and «cheap» mythologies. The same *aesthetic* disposition informs the following article published by the magazine *Muzak*. The article is a position-taking (Bourdieu 1993) against 45 singles and the *lower* popular culture that they were seen to represent.

[45 singles are] a sign of a macroscopic involution. *They are enjoying a crass and triumphalist revival*, thus reminding us of *what a monstrous money-making machine they have been in the past*. [...] This revival can be interpreted as the revenge middle class adults (*adulti piccolo-borghesi*) are taking over the

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17 The *Sanremo Festival* is a national musical competition, which has been annually broadcast by Italian public television since 1955. It has been one of the most popular media events in Italy, particularly during the 1960s and, to a lesser extent, the 1970s (Facchinotti 2001).

18 Antonino Antonucci Ferrara, *Perché Gong*, «Gong», n. 6, June 1975, no pages (booklet enclosed with the issue).

power teenagers have had over music charts for many years, before shifting their attention to other things such as *the more refined and expert listening required by long-playings*.

[...]

*The charts have never been an example of intelligence and taste*. It is sufficient to give a quick look to the current trends to get a sense of the deep idiocy they have reached [...] A lot of old idols (Mina, Celentano, Albano) still collect successes despite the fact that they should retire once and for all [...]. Even the most anonymous Italian-style groups (*complessini all'italiana*) do well (Equipe 84, Pooh, Camaleonti, etc...), despite being old glories *basically indistinguishable between each other*.<sup>19</sup> [my emphasis]

The rejection of Italian light music and the «lack of taste and intelligence» of the chart of 45 singles was a shared commitment of magazines occupying different positions within the field. This symbolic rupture established autonomy from purely economic imperatives, but also a distinction between popular music criticism and the main institution responsible for the promotion of Italian mass culture - the national radio-television (RAI). More specifically, music journalists conceived of RAI as an institution completely alien to criteria like professionalism and cultural expertise. Moreover, while the low quality of its TV shows was taken as emblematic of Italian mass culture, RAI was seen as a symbol of political control over popular culture. In this respect, as an institution controlled by the Italian government and, after 1975, by the parliament (Monteleone 2003), RAI was regulated according to a logic of political «allotment» (*lottizzazione*). This is what argues, for example, the following position-taking published by the magazine *Ciao 2001*.

Once again, a principle of wild allotment (*lottizzazione selvaggia*) prevailed [...]. The administrators showed to be more engaged in fighting between them, rather than seriously taking into account the skills of the people they had to hire [...]. That quality TV programmes could be possibly produced by the same

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<sup>19</sup> Roberto Renzi, *E' leggera: pesa alcuni miliardi*, «Muzak», n. 5 (*Nuova Serie*), September 1975, pp. 8-9.

people who created 'Canzonissima', 'Teatri Dieci', 'Sim Salabim', 'Milleluci', 'Totambot', 'Tanto Piacere', 'Spaccacuori', 'Mazzabubù', 'Ospiti delle due', 'Bim, Bum, Bam'... is an issue raising doubt.<sup>20</sup>

The long list of TV programmes, which includes the popular musical show *Canzonissima*, indicates the rejection of a whole cultural world; a world of 'low' popular entertainment enjoyed by the older generations and promoted by a political elite lacking cultural capital. These were, by and large, the categories of perception (Bourdieu 1996: 295-301) through which Italian music critics defined the cultural autonomy of their field. However, while the field was based on these shared commitments, the music magazines emerging during the 1970s defined themselves as cultural projects with different aims. As a result, popular music criticism became a cultural category struggled over by different editorial boards and audiences.

### *3.2 Institutional differentiation and the need for debate*

The institutional differentiation of the field was engendered by a series of organisational breaks taking place within the magazines' editorial boards. In 1973, *Ciao 2001* had become the leading institution within a cultural sector still characterised by a low degree of competition (see **table 1**); the magazine, with selling figures ranging between 60,000 and 80,000 copies per week (Rusconi 1976), was able to maintain this position until the early 1980s (Gaspari 1980: 88-89). Although *Muzak* was launched in October 1973, initially it shared with *Ciao 2001* a number of writers (Enzo Caffarelli, Marco Ferranti and Manuel Insolera). However, from 1974 the popular music press went through a process of increasing diversification. Early in 1974 *Muzak* cut any connection with *Ciao 2001*; that year, then, a group of people who had participated in the inception of *Muzak* (Marco Fumagalli, Peppo Delconte, Antonino Antonucci Ferrara and Riccardo

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<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, *Rai-tv, e' cambiato tutto... anzi niente*, «Ciao 2001», n. 20, 23 May 1976, p. 4.

Bertoncelli) left the editorial board in order to launch *Gong*. Overall, this progressive diversification engendered a wider debate about the function of popular music criticism within Italian society. This debate was also animated by readers, whose letters were regularly published by the magazines. Music journalists, indeed, conceived of the magazines as means of debate, and devoted significant efforts to the publication of reader's letters. More generally, there was significant ideological investment in the idea that the popular music press had to be a space of debate open to the views of other people (such as readers, musicians, cultural entrepreneurs and so on). *Ciao 2001*, for example, was conceived of by the editorial board as a means to discuss any issue that could concern the youth culture:

[Ciao 2001 is] a vehicle of opinion. The interpreter of both your world-view and a society that you desire to change [...] [It] is a means to exchange opinions and, most of all, an opportunity to discuss problems that usually are ignored even by the 'great independent press'.<sup>21</sup>

The magazine, in this respect, had a range of thematic sections devoted to the letters from readers. The section managed by the magazine's director (*Lettere al Direttore*) was the means through which the editorial line was defined and justified vis-à-vis the critiques of readers. While devoting less space to the feedback of the audience – a monthly section ranging between 2 and 4 pages – *Muzak* and *Gong* also used to discuss their cultural politics with readers on a regular basis. More importantly, through this practice, they could establish a distinction between themselves and traditional intellectuals, the latter being seen as elitist and disconnected from the masses.

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21 Saverio Rotondi, *Cari lettori e cari amici*, «Ciao 2001», n. 48, 2 December 1973, p. 5.

Muzak means also a different way of looking at things, a more intelligent and critical one. It also means, and will mean more and more, a new way of conceiving of the dialogue between readers and the magazine [...]. This has always been our intention, albeit we have not always been able to meet the challenge. We are not among the 'saints' of culture (*santoni della cultura*), and do not want to share anything with them, so we feel that there is still a lot to do in order to become truly progressive and free ourselves from regressive attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

We want to realise all the things that so far, for lack of pragmatism or realism, have not been attempted in Italy. The important thing is to work on things seriously and together. [...] This monthly will never become a ghetto for a few learned intellectuals (*pennaioli*) writing their own memories as a form of masturbation. This is a space where EVERYONE [sic] is welcome to play his own Gong.<sup>23</sup>

Music journalists, therefore, saw the ongoing debate with readers as a way to distinguish popular music criticism from the elitism associated with high culture. In this respect, debating with readers was a practice characterising the field's cultural identity vis-à-vis other spheres of intellectual labour. While the critical evaluation of music was a key activity carried out through the regular publication of reviews and features, it was not sufficient to define the specificity of the field, which was younger and less legitimate than other cultural sectors. In this respect, the publication and mediation of readers' letters became an institutionalised practice sustaining the struggle of journalists and readers over the social meaning of popular music criticism.

#### **4. What kind of cultural labour? Struggling over the meaning of criticism**

Both *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong* were asked to clarify the specificity of their editorial projects by their readers, but also to establish clear boundaries between criticism and other fields of practice. While the magazines distinguished themselves from other

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, *Referendumuzak*, «Muzak», n. 5, March 1974, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, editorial (no title), «Gong», n. 2, November 1974, p. 8.

cultural institutions (e.g. RAI, newspapers, traditional cultural elites), they also had to distinguish their practices from those of political actors, particularly in light of the growing influence that new political and social movements were acquiring in Italy during the 1970s. In this respect, the struggle over the meaning of criticism was exacerbated by a peculiar historical conjuncture. Starting from the occupation of universities in 1967, the years between the late 1960s and late 1970s saw the emergence of new forms of political mobilisation in Italy. More specifically, large sectors of the labour force and civil society started demanding better working and living conditions vis-à-vis the lack of structural reform under which many spheres of Italian life had been left during the years of the country's fast urbanisation (Ginsborg 1990). Practices of political engagement, then, emerged in different social fields, with the musical field being affected in a number of ways by this situation. During these years, for example, some musicians and bands developed explicitly political aesthetics (Fiori 1984, Prato 2010), and some cultural entrepreneurs established alternative music labels informed by both political and cultural aims (Fabbri 2007). The music press was affected by these forms of politicisation in two ways. First, it had to face the political activism of a part of its audience, which demanded from critics something more than a purely cultural role. Second, the political commitment of some journalists nourished editorial projects, like *Muzak* and *Gong*, which were defined as political or, at the very least, as willing to contribute to what journalists perceived as a broader climate of social and political upheaval. This fostered significant debate about the symbolic boundaries between cultural labour and political activism, thus making the status of popular music criticism an even more pressing issue of debate.

#### *4.1 Criticism as objective reporting*

As an organisation occupying a heteronomous position (Bourdieu 1993), *Ciao 2001* was committed to values that could maintain, if not increase, its economic leadership within the field. In this respect, the magazine's director (Saverio Rotondi) used to define the magazine's role according to values like economic autonomy and journalistic objectivity, with the former being seen as a pre-condition of the latter. This position was actively justified whenever readers questioned the magazine's editorial choices or asked to clarify its political line.

Many articles show clear sympathy for a certain leftist culture. I understand that most of Italian culture, nowadays, identifies itself with this ideology. I also understand that a Marxist stance might be beneficial to the magazine's circulation, but at least stop claiming that you are objective and apolitical.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to these allegations, Rotondi defined the magazine as committed to saying «things as they really are», with economic autonomy being defined as the tenet of «independence of judgement» and freedom from political control.

We have never said that we are apolitical, that we are politically apathetic or that we have no political concerns. We do our job with objectivity, and without serving a political party or monopolistic group. Our economic independence is the basis of our independent judgement. We do not hide ourselves behind ideological proclaims or catchphrases (*parole d'ordine*); we try to say things as they really are, which is obviously likely to cause discontent.<sup>25</sup>

This orientation was also defended when the discussion with readers focused on the magazine's choices of coverage. In these cases, the idea of objectivity was used to justify the magazine's attentiveness to changing music trends. Between 1975 and 1977,

<sup>24</sup> Claudio Felicetti, *In chiaro*, «Ciao 2001», n. 4, 1 February 1976, pp. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* (Saverio Rotondi, Answer to Felicetti).

for example, *Ciao 2001* provided extensive coverage of disco music; a trend that had gained prominence on Italian 45s charts since the 1975 (Sfardini 2001, Facchinotti 2001). Several readers accused the magazine of covering worthless music and having radically changed its identity. One reader, for example, argued that *Ciao 2001* had lost its identity as a magazine specialising in American and British rock.

When I see a page about Yes [progressive British band] and hundreds of articles about disco music and other sorts of muzak, my impression is that I am reading a non-specialised magazine, one of those we used to mock three years ago.<sup>26</sup>

As in discussions about the political orientation of *Ciao 2001*, Rotondi used the idea of objective journalism to justify the magazine's editorial strategy, one committed to informing the readers and reporting about new music trends.

You say we are the first ones among the betrayers of rock. Well, let's be clear: we make a magazine, and we do that to inform the readers, not to tell them every week the history of rock from ten years ago. If music changes, and if there is nothing new to say about Yes, it is not our fault. As professionals, we are the observers – not the makers – of the current situation. Your allegations are meaningless, as we are just journalists.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than defining normative aesthetic boundaries, the magazine used the idea of objective journalism in order to justify its flexible music coverage. This editorial strategy could well accommodate a heteronomous position open to the changes of the music market, rather than committed to a too restricted musical canon.

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<sup>26</sup> Gaetano Bottazzi, *Per la gioia dei quattordicenni*, «Ciao 2001», n. 9, 7 March 1977, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* (Saverio Rotondi, Answer to Bottazzi).

#### 4.2 Criticism as a political project

In contrast to *Ciao 2001*, *Muzak* and *Gong* saw music criticism as a creative, highly interpretative and explicitly political practice. There were, however, some important differences between the two magazines; differences that in 1974 had engendered the break within the group founding *Muzak*. More specifically, *Muzak* defined a *sociological* form of criticism based on the idea that music cannot be evaluated without considering the social contexts in which it is both produced and consumed. In this respect, the magazine, and particularly the director Giaime Pintor, rejected the idea of culture as an autonomous social reality.

Contrary to most acclaimed critics, we believe that there are no “schools” and “genres” to be defended as separate realities. We believe that culture needs to operate against itself, both today and in the future. It needs to work against the myth of Kulture, [that is] against everything that makes culture a value (or Value) which is separate from the social, human and political contexts in which it is produced.<sup>28</sup>

This position, however, remained an issue of debate among journalists and between journalists and readers. In this respect, readers criticised the project of *Muzak* according to opposite views. While some contended that music has nothing to do with politics, others claimed that pop music, as a ‘commercial’ and ‘bourgeois’ product, has to be excluded from any project with real political ambitions.

Rock music was born *within* an organised market. Most musicians come from a petty bourgeois or middle-class background (*piccolo-medio borghese*) and address a generally narrow-minded audience of students and middle-class people (*borghesi*). Since August 1968 pop music has been the main tool to silence youth protests in America, creating a Woodstock nation with plenty of music and not so much

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<sup>28</sup> Giaime Pintor, *Per il pop suo malgrado*, «Muzak», n. 10-11, August-September 1974, p. 46.

conscience.<sup>29</sup>

Why should music be a means of struggle (*lotta*)? Why should it be a means to understand certain social situations rather than anything else? [...] Music is a means of communication; it expresses thoughts and emotions, whatever they might be.<sup>30</sup>

This kind of discussions gave the magazine the opportunity to draw distinctions between its own conception of cultural criticism and those proposed by different actors of the field. For example, the editorial board argued that objectivity, for *Ciao 2001*, was a way of doing covert politics, one that is functional to «the system» (i.e. a capitalist society) and passively follows the most popular trends. *Ciao 2001*, from this standpoint, was seen as not much different from Italian tabloids like *Novella 2000* and *Grand Hotel*.

We envy 2001 as much as we envy Grand Hotel and Novella 2000. We sincerely envy them, as we think it must be pleasing and relaxing to passively follow popular fads without being worried about the counter-educational value (*valore diseducativo*) of one's own writings. We envy those who claim they “don't do politics”, because they do politics in a way that is both easier and covert and which favours the system. We admire those who in so many years (and probably in good faith) have never bothered with *interpreting the facts, rather than rattling them off in a neutral and dull fashion.*<sup>31</sup> [my emphasis]

For *Muzak*, then, music criticism had to have a clear interpretative stance. More specifically, it implied strong cultural choices (rather than the passive following of popular trends), and a clear political collocation. While *Ciao 2001* supported the idea of objective music journalism, for *Muzak* this position was a mask covering, in essence, a capitalist ideology based on maximisation of profits.

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29 Paolo Navarra, no title, «Muzak», n. 3, December 1973, p. 4.

30 Corrado Vitale, *BOAMM!!*, «Muzak», n. 13, November 1974, p. 62.

31 *Ivi*, p. 63 (Anonymous, Answer to Vitale).

### 4.3 *Creative labour as political*

The journalists and readers of *Gong* similarly discussed the role of criticism and the boundaries between music journalism and political activism. Although *Gong* defined a cultural project with the same political aims of *Muzak*, the former was more explicitly concerned with defining a *creative* form of criticism based on the experimental use of words and images. This position arose a frequent critique among readers, namely that *Gong* was an overly ‘difficult’ magazine tailored for a small avant-garde of the youth culture.

I always read *Gong* with attention, but 60 per cent of my attention, which is due to the fact that I cannot understand what has been written and why. [...] Feel free to address a restricted number of experts (*addetti ai lavori*) and intellectuals closed in their world. I say it without irony – just clarify [...] that you are not addressing the masses, the people who need to be helped to understand how they might build a culture for themselves and on the basis of the right popular traditions.<sup>32</sup>

While addressing this kind of allegations, the editorial board emphasised the intrinsically *political* value of aesthetic research. In other words, they redefined political activism on the basis of purely aesthetic criteria, rather than subordinating cultural labour to political activism. From this standpoint, *Gong* explicitly rejected the aesthetic poverty of political slogans and outlets.

*Gong* is not a leaflet and does not mean to follow the litany of slogans, because we know that the reality in which we live requires something more; it is a complex and articulate reality [...]. Our language (which is very different from academic vacuity) is probably confused, but it is confused because it tries to engage with processes of construction of the new [...] It is not possible to express new things through banality and stereotypes. When you are trying to transform the world, you have to transform yourself as

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32 Massimo Padovani, no title, «*Gong*», n. 7-8, July-August 1976, pp. 3-4.

well, and this requires effort on the part of writers and their readers as well.<sup>33</sup>

For *Gong*, then, the «construction of the new» required mobilising the highest level of cultural capital and defining the farthest distance from the means of political actors<sup>34</sup> (as well as from purely economic imperatives). In this respect, *Gong* was as aggressive as *Muzak* when it had to make distinctions between its own project and *Ciao 2001*. More specifically, *Ciao 2001* was seen as supporting a dangerous ideological confusion (one mixing ‘Gramsci with Jesus’), and despicable aesthetic choices as concerned both its music coverage and visual presentation.

Leafing carefully through the pages [of *Ciao 2001*], we find some depressing artwork which is not even redeemed by the magazine's glossy paper (*carta patinata*). We also realise that the notorious articles of cultural politics are simply a means to fill the pages left empty by those ‘talking about music’. *Ciao 2001* is unspeakable from a musical point of view, and it keeps pursuing a project of collective cultural degradation (*deculturazione collettiva*) which jumbles together epitaphs to Gramsci, digressions about Jesus and [articles on] Freud and Cossiga [Italian Christian Democratic politician].<sup>35</sup>

As shown by this exploration of the struggles of journalists and their readers over the meaning of popular music criticism, the social role of this newly established practice, and the politics pursued by different editorial projects, were issues of ongoing discussion and dispute in 1970s Italy. In this respect, the Italian popular music press was already a sufficiently autonomous cultural field, one characterised by competing positions as well as shared stakes. More generally, this discussion about the Italian case shed a different light on the contours of criticism in popular culture. Although the

33 *Ibid.* (Anonymous, Answer to Padovani)

34 This position, which implies a strong belief in the prophetic role of intellectuals, has historical antecedents in the literary field. See Bourdieu (1996: 129-131) on Émile Zola, and Boschetti (1988: 111-117) on Jean-Paul Sartre.

35 Troglodytes Niger, *Stampa ‘giovanile’ in Italia: belli, consumatori, ghettizzati...*, «Gong», n. 7-8, July-August, 1977, pp. 56-58.

sociological literature about cultural evaluation has shown that institutions of evaluation have become an integral part of contemporary popular culture, it has paid less attention to the contested nature of criticism as a cultural institution and to the diversity of practices that critics may perform. In this respect, as shown by the strong investment of Italian journalists on discussions with readers, critics may engage with a wider array of practices than reviewing cultural products, especially if these practices sustain the symbolic autonomy of their field vis-à-vis other cultural spaces. Further, a closer look at critics' and audiences' categories of perception makes it possible to reconstruct the quite complex space of possibles (Bourdieu 1996: 193-205) in relation to which they define the social meaning of criticism. As shown by the Italian case, this space may include cultural and political actors, but also ways of producing, mediating and consuming culture that critics associate with a different social world. The findings discussed raise several questions about the study of cultural expertise in contemporary culture, and call for a different consideration and use of Bourdieu's work.

##### **5. Conclusion: field theory and the changing contours of cultural evaluation**

As shown in the first part of this article, Bourdieu has been a highly influential figure on sociological research addressing cultural critics. However, while the categories of field theory and, more generally, Bourdieu's conceptual oppositions figure prominently in this research strand, the relational and genealogical perspective that underpins field theory has been rarely put into use. However, a field perspective may be more than valuable to study the changing institutions and practices of criticism, especially in light of recent arguments about the radically altered nature of contemporary cultural criticism (Hanrahan 2012, Roberge 2011). In this respect, Hanrahan (2012) has recently argued that social media, and the proliferation of online tools for the ranking of cultural

products, undermine the autonomy of critics working within the fields of film and popular music. According to the author, the aesthetic criteria on which critics had historically based their evaluations (e.g. artistic originality and historical significance) have been replaced by new *consensual criteria* fostered by social media. As a result, the logics of popularity and celebrity – that is, how many people share or ‘like’ something – have displaced the cultural authority of critics writing for newspapers and magazines. Similar changes have been described also by Roberge (2011), albeit in a rather different light. Indeed, the author sees digital media as introducing a *democratic* dimension to cultural criticism, as ‘online criticism allows for people to «talk back», to comment and disagree on everything, including other people's critiques’ (*ivi*, 445). Although these arguments about the changing nature of criticism need further empirical investigation, I want to suggest that an emerging research agenda about criticism and new media – that is, about criticism in contemporary popular culture – might be fruitfully informed by a field perspective. Indeed, field theory can move the aforementioned discussions from an assessment of criticism as an ideal-type, to an empirical study of the ways in which digital media are affecting different organisations, their practices and the struggles of critics working in different cultural fields. It is very likely that new media have changed the way in which established experts conceive and practise their work (as shown by Hanrahan's interviews). However, they have also facilitated the emergence of new organisations, formats (such as blogs and web-zines) and technologies of evaluation. In this respect, one possibility for future research might be to investigate the struggles of different generations of critics and audiences over changing institutions, practices and technologies. The genealogical perspective of field theory, then, may be helpful in order to reconsider some of the changes that have been ascribed to the rise of digital technologies. For example, while forms of interaction between experts and audiences

are undoubtedly facilitated by the Internet, they were made possible, to some extent, also by older technologies (as shown by the discussion about Italian music magazines). In this respect, field theory may be extremely useful to deconstruct the rhetoric of technological change, as it allows scholars to explore the extent to which technological changes have become stakes within different cultural fields, and thus objects of the manoeuvres of competing actors and interests. Depending on the field, then, we might find a variety of different strategies and logics at work, rather than a uniform way of practising and conceiving cultural criticism.

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